OVEMBER 2006
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THE SHONKY AWARDS

Lies, duds and other useless products

Childcare: long waits, high cost, quality concerns

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TESTED: FRIDGES VACUUM CLEANERS LAWNMOWERS FOOD PROCESSORS ICED TEA FAKE TANS

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Spotlight on childcare

"I had to accept a centre I'm not comfortable with, as it was the only one available."

"When I looked at childcare facilities I was alarmed at the small number of staff catering for a big number of children. So many babies and toddlers wandering around aimlessly looking for attention from their carers, who were too busy to notice."

"Still in shock that it will cost more for childcare than it will to put my children through private school."

These are just a few representative quotes from people who completed CHOICE's survey on the availability, choice, cost and quality of childcare and revealed some of the real problems parents have getting the best care for their children when they return to work.

64% of survey respondents had suffered from long waiting lists — sometimes as long as two or three years. 44% couldn't choose which days their children attended childcare. 38% couldn't even choose the number of days.

Jane Mackenzie
Editor

As for choosing what kind of childcare, 45% of respondents who'd sent their child to a commercially run centre said it was because it was the only one available, not out of choice — and certainly not because of the cost, because 51% of respondents with children in a commercial centre had found the high cost a problem.

It's a hard decision for most parents to put their very young children into childcare. They shouldn't then find that their choice is limited and the availability uncertain, the quality sometimes questionable and the cost almost prohibitive.

It's hard to see how the choice, availability and quality of childcare can improve without an injection of funds — and with many parents already struggling with the high cost of childcare, many people (experts and parents alike) think the government should be responsible for this.

www.CHOICEextra.com.au

This is a free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers. It's an index of CHOICE articles going back to Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs of many of them so you can read them immediately, without having to go and find your issue of CHOICE.

To use this website you need to log in with your subscriber number, which is the number directly above your name on the mailing label that comes with the magazine.

If you see the symbol in a magazine article it means there's extra information on choiceextra that we couldn't fit into the magazine.

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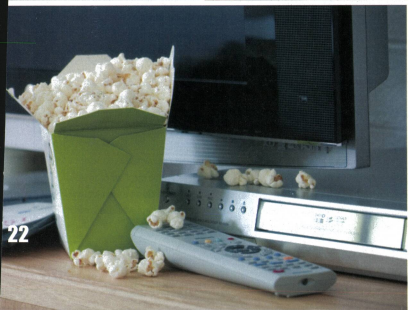
All you need is the model name and number you want to buy, the price you want to beat, and your CHOICE subscriber number (from the mailing label with the magazine). CHOICE Shopper is available to personal subscribers only, and you can use it to buy major laundry, kitchen and home entertainment appliances, cameras and computers (all costing over $100) and cars (over $10,000).



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CORRECTION

COTS

CHOICE, October 2006

In *What to look for* on page 43, the text should have read: "Any large space between adjacent components must be between 50 mm and 95 mm to avoid the baby's head getting trapped." This ensures the gap is wide enough not to present a limb entrapment hazard, but is too small for the baby's head to pass through and get trapped.

Can you help?

SELLING YOUR PROPERTY?

If you're thinking about selling your home or investment property (or know somebody who is), CHOICE would love to hear from you or them. We're researching the property sales process and gathering information about sellers' experiences.

To volunteer and/or for more information, send an email to property@choice.com.au, write to Property Sales, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or send a fax to (02) 9577 3377. A small gift will be provided to those who take the time to work with us on this project, as a token of our appreciation. Thanks for your help.

BORROWING AGAINST YOUR HOME

We need your help with research into **reverse mortgages.**

A reverse mortgage allows someone aged 60 or over to borrow money against the value of their home. The amount you owe increases over time as interest and fees are added. It usually only needs to be repaid when you sell the house, permanently move out (such as to go into long-term aged care) or die.

If you've taken up a reverse mortgage or are thinking about it, we'd love to hear from you. Please write to the **Money Team**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or send an email to money@choice.com.au.

Vegetarian benefits?

Vegetarians in western countries tend to enjoy a good level of health, partly because they have reasonably healthy diets in terms of factors like fat composition, and partly because they have a tendency to be more health-conscious than average (for example, by not smoking). However, the benefits of a vegetarian diet may not be as broad as those typically promoted, reports the September issue of CHOICE *Health Reader*.

A review article from Oxford University, UK, published in the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, summarised current knowledge about the health effects of vegetarian diets. Among the key points:

- Fewer vegetarians die of heart disease than non-vegetarians (with comparable backgrounds and lifestyles), probably because they tend to have lower blood cholesterol.
- Vegetarians on average have a lower body-mass index (BMI) than comparable non-vegetarians, and the proportion of vegetarians who are obese is lower than among non-vegetarians.
- However, no clear differences have been shown for other major causes of death such as stroke and colorectal and breast cancers.

Also in September Health Reader:

- If you're older and vigorous exercise is no longer an option, simply keeping busy can be beneficial, say US researchers. Activities like walking, doing household chores (vacuuming, for example), and doing volunteer work all help you expend energy, which can help you live longer.
- Research from Tasmania has found that regular doses of chilli in your food can reduce the amount of insulin your body requires to help control blood sugar levels after eating. Not only can regular spicy meals help beat the winter chills, but they might even help people with diabetes.

If you'd like to subscribe to CHOICE *Health Reader*, call 1800 069 552 toll-free, or go to choice.com.au/magazines.

ASIC watches credit card advertising

The Australian Securities & Investments Commission (ASIC) recently held discussions with two credit card companies over concerns about their advertising, with the following good outcomes for consumers being agreed:

- **GE MONEY** will refund $25 to 2500 credit card customers who applied for its **Go Mastercard** online. This represents about 1% of **Go Mastercard** customers. The **GE MONEY** website said, "There is no annual fee for your **Go Mastercard**. That means it costs you nothing to have it — pay nothing and make it your card of choice year after year." Despite this, customers were charged a $25 establishment fee. **GE MONEY** has now removed the statement from its website and refunded the establishment fee to customers who applied online. New customers will have to pay the establishment fee.
- **AUSSIE** delayed the introduction of a higher interest rate for cash advances for existing customers. The **AUSSIE Mastercard** was advertised as "having a low ongoing rate" of 9.99%. In early June **AUSSIE** introduced a 13.99% interest rate for cash advances, taking effect from 10 August. **AUSSIE** has now delayed this for at least six months for cardholders who became customers before 21 June. New customers pay the higher rate.

Rubbing it in

Most people don't use nearly enough sunscreen to properly protect their skin in the sun. But new research confirms that it's not just how much you put on, but how you apply it counts too.

Researchers in the UK, keen to protect the Majorca-holidaying British public, have found that rubbing sunscreen into your skin reduces its effectiveness significantly. They think it may be because the sunscreen gets rubbed off the top of skin cells and pushed into crevices and pores between cells.

So CHOICE's advice on sunscreen still applies:

- Choose an SPF 30+ broad-spectrum sunscreen.
- Apply a generous coat about 20 minutes before going out into the sun, and again just before you do — a double coat makes it more likely you've used enough and helps to avoid missed spots.
- You need to use about six teaspoons (30 mL) to cover your whole body.
- Don't rub it in — glide it on in a layer like painting a wall and let it dry there.

And if you can, cover up and avoid the sun in the middle of the day.

Reporting problems with medicines

You'll still be able to report your negative experiences with medicines following the Pharmacy Guild's decision to provide funding for the Adverse Medical Events (AME) line.

The AME line was established in 2000 and is staffed by pharmacists. In the first five years of its operation the line received over 3000 calls reporting, among other things, unexpected side effects from medicines and incorrect labels on drugs. Approximately one in five of these calls resulted in a report to the Adverse Drug Reactions Advisory Committee of the Therapeutic Goods Administration for further review.

Geraldine Moses, AME line project officer and senior pharmacist, thinks consumers have an important role to play in monitoring drug safety. "Clinical trials are done in an artificial environment and can only tell us so much. It's important for us to be able to track the safety of drugs in the general population," she says.

The line was originally funded as a pilot project by the Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care, but was in danger of closing when another funding source couldn't be found. Now the Pharmacy Guild has agreed to provide funding for at least the next 12 months.

You can report a variety of medicine-related problems to the AME line. This includes complaints about prescribing, dispensing, administration, storage, manufacturing, samples, poor advice from health professionals and concerns about any Consumer Medicines Information leaflets (CMI). These are reported, confidentially, to the appropriate professional organisations with the aim of preventing problems happening again.

The AME line — 1300 134 237 — operates Monday to Friday, 9 am to 6 pm (AEST). Reports can also be made online at www.mater.org.au/ame/.

Home
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For reporting or advice on adverse drug reactions or errors associated with medicine use
1300 134 237
Available Australia wide for the cost of a local call (9am - 6pm AEST)
The Adverse Medicine Events (AME) Line:
Provides consumers with a mechanism to report adverse experiences with medicines.
Provides an opportunity for consumers to consult with a pharmacist about medicine safety.
Ensures that consumers' concerns about medicine safety are taken seriously and reported to the relevant authority.
The AME Line is an initiative of the Australian Council of Safety and Quality in Health Care and is operated by Mater Misericordiae Health Services Brisbane Limited.

Coffee without a bitter aftertaste

In a January 2003 article on fair trading, CHOICE reported that Europe and North America were ahead of Australia for availability of Fairtrade products and a labelling structure. Happily, the situation here has improved significantly.

Fairtrade offers an alternative to trade practices that force poor producers to be at the mercy of changing market prices. It's grown into a worldwide movement with a single international labelling system (Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International — FLOI). Its recognisable logo (above left) guarantees that the product you're buying has been produced and traded ethically.

Fairtrade makes sure disadvantaged farmers, workers and artisans receive a minimum guaranteed price for their produce or work, even if the market price is low. And if the market price goes over the guaranteed Fairtrade one, the producer receives the higher price. Producers also receive a premium that goes towards their communities' social and economic development. Fairtrade allows producers to form a direct, long-term relationship with importers, cutting out the middleman and giving the producers more security.

Since our 2003 report, a non-profit organisation, the Fair Trade Association of Australia and New Zealand (FTAANZ), has been set up to co-ordinate and strengthen the movement here. And in 2005, $4 million worth of products certified by FLOI were sold in Australia — double what was sold in 2004.

In addition, the number of Australian outlets for Fairtrade has increased. Some Woolworths and Coles supermarkets stock some brands of Fairtrade coffee and tea. Both retailers say they may stock more brands and products in the future, depending on demand from customers. Prices for Fairtrade products are competitive — for example, 90 g of Scarborough Fair Granulated coffee retails at Woolworths for $4.29, compared to the equivalent Nescafé product that sells at $5.37 for 100 g.

Plenty of smaller, independent retailers and roasters across Australia also sell Fairtrade coffee, tea and chocolate, or you can order it online. Many cafés have got in on the Fairtrade act, and some workplaces now serve Fairtrade tea and coffee to their employees. To find where you can buy Fairtrade products in your state, go to www.oxfam.org.au/campaigns/mtf/fairtrade/index.html.

Oxfam Australia has been instrumental in raising the profile of Fairtrade through campaigns and by supporting the Fairtrade fortnight held every year in May. A member of the International Fair Trade Association, Oxfam sells its own range of fairly traded goods as well as Fairtrade coffee, tea, chocolate, rice and soccer balls. National Campaigns Manager, Bruce Francis, thinks consumer interest is a major driving force behind Fairtrade's popularity. "When people are aware of what [Fairtrade] is about, they want to support it."

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

IF THERE'S NO FRESH AIR

Our counterparts in the US recently reviewed Whirlpool's $US250 'fabric freshener', a garment-bag-sized, fold-out steam chamber designed to remove odours and wrinkles, just with steam, no chemicals. They put in several rumpled dress shirts and other cotton items steeped in cigarette smoke and a cooking concoction of cumin, garlic and cloves, added some distilled water and after 40 minutes got "relatively wrinkle-free shirts that smelled laundry-fresh". The gadget is aimed at those who'd like a little extra mileage out of shirts, suits and other clothes that aren't quite ready yet for the wash, *Consumer Reports* comments. That's all well and good, but what's wrong with hanging your clothes outside to freshen them up, or in a steamy bathroom while you're showering on your travels?

WATCH CARE FOR PSYCHICS

India's *Insight* magazine gives its readers 10 tips on how to take care of your watch — good advice, considering a watch can be expensive and tends to get a fair bit of wear. However, while we fully agree with tip number 10 (never leave a drained battery inside your watch), we're puzzled about the advice: "Change the battery at least six months before you expect its energy to run out." Perhaps it's meant for psychics?

TYPING BY STEALTH

The movie *Das Boot* is about a "black and mysterious" submarine that glides beneath the waves sinking enemy ships. Now comes the first stealth keyboard, reports *Which?* magazine in the UK. 'Das Keyboard' is black all over and has no markings on any keys — you have to be able to touch type to use it. At www.daskeyboard.com the advertising promises it'll improve accuracy and increase your typing speed, as your brain has to adapt quickly to memorise key positions, like when learning the piano. "If you are an über-geek, then using Das Keyboard will be the closest you'll get to living dangerously," comments *Which?*, and with a price of around $US90, it's cheaper than a submarine...

yourletters

SAVING WATER

I wish to draw your attention to an omission from your article *In hot water* (CHOICE, September 2006). There's no reference at all to low-pressure gravity-fed hot-water systems.

Low-pressure hot-water systems usually last between 12 and 20 years, which is much longer than a mains-pressure system. They don't need to withstand high pressure and are nearly always constructed with copper tanks.

Sure, the flow rates are lower than with mains pressure and special plumbing may be required for mixer taps, as not all brands are designed for unequal pressure. But in an environment of increasingly restricted water availability the waste associated with high-pressure, high-flow systems is undesirable.

Having grown up in a rural environment with only off-roof tank supply, the value of water is something I appreciate. The near total disregard for water conservation exhibited by the majority of Australians is unbelievable in a continent where water is such a limited resource.

Grant, SA

Gravity-fed hot-water systems are becoming much less common (especially in cities), but we agree with Grant's comments about their advantages. They last longer than mains-pressure systems, don't require much maintenance and their low flow rate means people will generally use a lot less water with this type of system (although with perhaps less satisfactory showers). However, you can also save water with a mains-pressure system by installing flow restrictors or low-flow shower heads and taps.

CO-PAYMENT CONFUSION

I recently had a minor surgical procedure in a private hospital. I walked into the operating theatre, climbed onto the operating table and, when the procedure was over, got off and walked to the waiting room.

I had to wait for an hour (chairs provided) before being allowed to leave. The hospital billed **MEDIBANK PRIVATE** for the theatre charges, but I had to pay a $50 co-payment for my 'accommodation'. I can't believe that sitting in a chair in the waiting room for an hour constitutes 'accommodation'.

Len Taylor

Some policies let you agree to pay a co-payment of a certain amount per day in hospital, in order to reduce your health insurance premium. The way co-payments are applied can vary between health funds and between different policies with the same fund. In some cases a co-payment may only be charged for an overnight stay in a private hospital, while in others it may be charged for same-day procedures and for stays in a public hospital as a private patient.

*The **MEDIBANK PRIVATE** brochure for Len's policy clearly indicates that a co-payment will be charged for same-day procedures. However, it's at the very least confusing for **MEDIBANK PRIVATE** to indicate that this payment is for 'accommodation'. **MEDIBANK PRIVATE** didn't wish to comment, but says that it has contacted Len to discuss his concerns.*

THUMBS UP!

▮ Chris, of Monterey Keys, Queensland, awards a 'Thumbs up' to **JARVIS WALKER**. After his kids tried out their new fishing rods, the reels became stiff and hard to use. He sent an email to the company and received two brand-new (and more expensive) reels free of charge, along with two baseball caps for the kids.

▮ Elizabeth, of Sydney, awards a 'Thumbs up' to THE SWATCH GROUP for waiving a $120 repair fee and fixing her watch free, even though it was out of warranty.

CUTTING IT FINE

Whenever possible, I arrange to have my bills paid by direct debit from my account. I always leave it until the day the payment is due before I make the transfer. But I was just wondering what happens if there's a glitch in this transfer between my bank and the receiving institution? Would I be liable for a late fee?

Peter Hallinan

The Australian Bankers Association said that under clause six of the Electronic Funds Transfer Code, if the payment is delayed because of a problem with the bank's systems, the bank will be responsible for the late fee. Some companies also have a grace period before a late fee is charged to accommodate any such problems. However, if you know for certain when your transfer was made but you're charged a late fee, it'd be worth querying it — just in case the fault hasn't been noticed.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to *Thumbs up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Len Taylor, receives *It ain't necessarily so ... bro*, or any other book of his choice from Consumer Bookshelf, page 48.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.

10 products to make you weep in despair.

THE 2006 CHOICE SHONKY AWARDS

CHOICE tests hundreds of products and services each year. Our articles usually emphasise the good performers with our *What to buy* list and Best Buy recommendations. But we also come across so many duds, bombs and failures, and uncover so many unsafe, unethical, dishonest or plain hilarious products, that we thought they deserved a special mention. So we created the CHOICE SHONKY AWARDS.

When we asked CHOICE staff for nominations covering the last 12 months of test work, the list quickly blew out to over 40 products and services. And that was after severely culling the contribution from our money team. Their submission ran for several pages — are they suggesting the entire finance industry should be awarded a SHONKY?

DEGREES OF SHONKYNESS

Some products we came across are so obviously and blatantly shonky that they don't really deserve an award. For example, the insurance policy against alien abduction (the truth is out there), or the big banks offering a whopping 0.01% interest on transaction accounts (is anybody surprised? Hello? Anybody?).

We were after more subtle shonkyness, shonkyness that's not visible at first glance — more sophisticated shonkyness, if you like. Products that don't do the main thing they're supposed to do, products with interesting fine print, unsafe products. Products that make you weep in despair if you're unlucky enough to buy them, and perhaps draw a chuckle or a stunned "what the…?" when you read about them.

So here they are (drum roll)…without any further ado…we give you…the Awards you've been waiting for*…the Awards you simply can't do without**… the Awards that will improve your life forever#…the only##…the 100% pure+…the inaugural… Top 10 CHOICE SHONKYS 2006!

* *Based on a survey of two readers.*

** *According to this journalist.*

\# *Results may vary.*

\#\# *At the time of printing.*

\+ *Ingredients: Awards 21%; fill text 79%.*

THE CHOICE 'PIGS CAN FLY' SHONKY

Goes to the…

LIFE MIRACLE Magnetic Laundry System (CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2006)

Add these two magnetic balls to your washing machine instead of detergent — so the promise goes — and they'll clean your clothes with "nature's most powerful force". If they meant 'water' by that, we'd agree — washing with the balls and plain water had about the same cleaning effect as washing in plain water alone (the centre and right swatches respectively in the photo above; the one on the left was washed in detergent). Why you'd want to add $80 worth of magnetic balls to the water is one of life's true miracles.

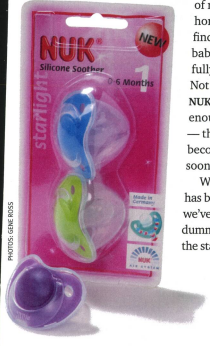
THE CHOICE 'SIZE DOES MATTER' SHONKY

Goes to the…

NUK Starlight Silicone Soother (dummy) (CHOICE, October 2005, April 2006 and July 2006)

Product shonkyness can have an amusing side — but certainly not when it affects child safety. The **NUK** dummy's small shield doesn't meet the (non-mandatory) Australian standard requirements, which means it's a choking hazard. We've received a number of reader stories of horrified parents finding their distressed baby with the dummy fully in their mouth. Not good enough, **NUK**, but also not good enough, government — the standard should become mandatory as soon as possible.

While this model has been discontinued, we've found other **NUK** dummies that don't meet the standard.



PHOTOS: GEMI ROSS

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR A LOT OF HOT OXYGEN

Goes to…

OXYGEN4LIFE (CHOICE, July 2006)

Feeling tired? Run down? Flat? Then you could drink 10 mL of this product's "bio-available oxygen" once or twice a day and "keep your body topped up with oxygen" for "enhanced quality of life". Or you could breathe — which is widely regarded as the platinum standard for oxygenating your blood. And it's much cheaper too: the 250 mL of de-ionised water, Atlantic sea salt and "bio-available oxygen" that make up **OXYGEN4LIFE** cost us $55.

At least after being talked to by the NSW Food Authority, the company has revised its labelling and removed a number of health claims.

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR MOST CREATIVE PRODUCT NAME

Goes to…

SEAGERS Gin and Tonic with a Squeeze of Lime (CHOICE, July 2006)

Gin and tonic with a squeeze of lime — what's creative about that, you may ask. It's the rather straightforward description of a popular drink, and lacking a classier alternative you might just buy one of these cans.

Thing is, according to its label there's not a trace of gin in it (for some reason it's vodka). Nor quinine (the ingredient that makes tonic water tonic) or anything else referred to as tonic water. Nor even a drop of lime.

And that's why we wonder how many cans the marketing person had before coming up with the name.

Seagers
GIN
&
TONIC
INGREDIENTS: CARBONATED WATER, VODKA (12.8%), SUGAR, FOOD ACID (INS. 330, 331), FLAVOUR, PRESERVATIVE (211.)
CONTAINS APPROX 1.5 STANDARD DRINKS.
MADE IN AUSTRALIA FROM LOCAL & IMPORTED INGREDIENTS.
INDEPENDENT DISTILLERS (AUST) PTY. LTD.
80 DWANN DVE, LANGSTON, VICTORIA 3025, AUSTRALIA.
5c REFUND AT COLLECTION DEPOTS
5c WHEN SOLD IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR MEAN MATHS

Goes to…

- **Some credit cards (you know who you are)**

(CHOICE, October 2006)

We looked at 15 major credit card providers and found they calculate interest in at least 10 different ways. That alone deserves a SHONKY for Consumer Confusion.

If you end up paying more interest on a credit card that charges 10% interest than on one charging 18%, for exactly the same transactions, then it must be either a mistake or a new fundamental mathematical breakthrough.

Or just plain meanness — which is what we'd like to award here: the eight credit cards that calculate daily interest on the *full* purchase amount back to the original date of purchase, even if you've paid some of it off in the meantime. The ones that void the interest-free period for new purchases if you're carrying an unpaid debt from the previous month. The ones that covertly hurt you if you can't pay off your balance by the due date.

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR SOMETHING (NOT QUITE) FISHY (ENOUGH)

Goes to the…

- **LEAN CUISINE Purely Fish** range

(CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2006)

Frozen fish products as a category almost deserve a SHONKY: about two thirds of all the products we looked at contained only 60% fish or less. In quite a few of those the crumbs, batter or sauce outweighed the fish.

But if you're in that group, as is the **LEAN CUISINE** range with *only 48% fish content*, and then call your product 'Purely Fish', that's so fishy you're asking for a SHONKY.

THE CHOICE iSHONK FOR DUAL-LEVEL SHONKYNESS

Goes to the…

- **APPLE iPod**

(CHOICE *Computer*, Sep/Oct 2005, and CHOICE, July 2006)

An iPod is a significant investment, so you don't want your **APPLE** to be a lemon. And if there is something wrong with it, you'd expect an easy repair and warranty service. Podluck.

Level 1. Several readers complained about cracked screens, faulty batteries and problems with sound reproduction.

Level 2. APPLE doesn't allow retailers to handle complaints under warranty (which is their obligation under Fair Trading laws) — you have to send your faulty iPod to **APPLE** yourself via Australia Post. And if they decide the fault isn't covered by the warranty, you'll have to foot the entire bill.

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR UNAUSTRALIAN CONTENT

Goes to the…

- **BLACK AND GOLD** meat pie

(CHOICE, May 2006)

What would a day at the footy be without a meat pie? A true Aussie icon, quality-assured by the Food Standards Code.

Well, if you want to call it quality. The Code actually doesn't ask for very much when it comes to meat content for meat pies: 25% is all that's required. And the definition of 'meat' is currently quite liberal at that — snouts, ears, tendons and blood vessels from a surprisingly large range of animals all qualify.

So we think it's deceit if a treat cheats on even that little meat. The **BLACK AND GOLD** had only 17% of the good stuff, which is not only shonky — it's unAustralian.

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR GENTLE CLOTHES WETTING

Goes to the…

ALDI Mezzo MWM7 and **HOMEMAKER HMWM7** washing machines (which are technically similar, rebadged models. Neither is still available). (CHOICE Online, April 2006 and June 2006)

Less than $400 for a washing machine? Bargain. But when it comes down to it, you'd ideally still want it to clean your clothes. Which is what this machine doesn't do very well. In fact, it's the worst model for dirt removal we've tested in living (CHOICE) memory.

At its rated capacity of 7 kg, it seemed totally overloaded and hardly moved the clothes during the wash and spin cycles. But hey, there's a big upside to so little wash or spin action: the machine is very gentle on clothes.

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR BEST DIRT REDISTRIBUTION

Goes to the…

iROBOT ROOMBA robot vacuum cleaner (CHOICE, November 2006)

It's about time they invented a robot that vacuums the house for us — it's just that the **iROBOT** has a few minor shortcomings. Like, it's almost useless on carpet. It's OK on hard floors, though extremely slow, taking minutes to cover what you'd take seconds to do. And it's noisy. Oh, and ours didn't automatically return to its base for recharging, as it's supposed to.

But what really made us doubt was its dirt redistribution function: when the small dirt container starts filling up, every time the **iROBOT** bumps into a wall or obstacle, a little heap of collected dirt falls out again. **iROBOT**? iDon'tthinkso.

On that note — keep them coming for next year.

SPECIAL MENTION

THE CHOICE SHONKY FOR SHONKYEST QUOTE

(CHOICE, September 2006)

"We don't consider wholemeal flour to be a characterising ingredient in wholemeal bread."

Awarded to a manufacturer of wholemeal bread, for their creative interpretation of what is or isn't a characterising ingredient according to the Food Standards Code.

PHOTOLIBRARY

CARING FOR KIDS

Available, affordable, high-quality childcare is still out of reach for many families, according to our recent survey of 1200 parents.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Long waiting lists** *and lack of choice over which days, the number of days and the type of childcare available were the major problems our survey respondents found when looking for childcare.*
- **Once they'd got into** *childcare, high costs and staffing issues (high staff turnover, too many children looked after at once) were problems many parents had to deal with.*
- **It's hard to see** *how the choice, availability and quality of childcare can improve without an injection of funds — and with parents already struggling with costs, many think the government should be responsible for this.*

In June this year CHOICE sent out an Australia-wide survey to people who have children six years or younger and who have used or looked for childcare, to find out their experiences of the childcare system. Respondents told us what problems they'd had when looking for childcare, and those who'd used childcare in the last two years also reported on the difficulties they'd experienced within the childcare system.

Some respondents said they'd had little trouble finding affordable, quality childcare in a community-based/not-for-profit centre, commercial long-day care centre or through family daycare. Others said they'd struggled to find childcare but were happy with it once they found it. But many said looking for childcare was a nightmare of long waiting lists and juggling schedules to find a place. Disturbingly, some parents said they'd felt compelled to take whatever they could get. And some said the cost of childcare cancelled out the economic value of returning to work altogether.

Problems our survey respondents had once they got a place for their child or children included high cost, high staff turnover, too few staff looking after too many children at once, having to fundraise for the centre, parking, unsuitable opening and closing times, unsuitability of staff and old or inadequate premises. These problems differed depending on the type of care they'd chosen (see Table 1, far right).

JOIN THE QUEUE

"I live in a small town (population 8000) and we're required to line up outside the daycare centre as early as possible in the morning (5 am onwards) on the day that they take applications for the next six-month period." Sara, Queensland.

"All the centres we saw, the first thing out of their mouths [was] no places for at least a year and a half and that was seven months before the baby was born. Sometimes you felt you had to settle for inferior centres, just to get a place until something better appears." Jennifer, NSW.

"I found plenty of childcare centres in my area, but waiting lists were very long and most of them weren't of high quality anyway." Leanne, Queensland.

While recent government figures indicate an

oversupply of childcare in some areas, our survey revealed that other areas face shortages. In fact, the biggest obstacle faced by our respondents when looking for childcare was long waiting lists (see Table 2, below) — 64% of people who completed the survey reported them. On a state basis, even in best-case WA and SA around 50% of survey respondents mentioned long waiting lists. Waiting lists are also generally more of a difficulty in cities than regional areas.

Parents spoke of waiting lists that were sometimes as long as two or three years. One respondent was shocked to be told that they should have put their name down at a childcare centre before their child was born, but many parents said they'd done just that and still had trouble getting a place. And there were even cases of parents who'd had to refuse work because of lack of available care.

Some parents also thought waiting lists weren't very systematic: 12% of parents who answered our survey said people who'd apparently been behind them on the waiting lists had got places before they had. While this may be because some centres give siblings priority, or because government policy gives priority for at-risk children, it added to the frustration of those still waiting for a place.

44% of those surveyed said they'd been unable to get the days they wanted, while 38% had problems getting the number of days they needed. And getting childcare outside normal working hours proved a problem for 14% of our respondents.

The Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), Mal Brough, says waiting lists aren't a reliable measure of demand "...as they are often out of date and people routinely join multiple lists". This seems a feeble reason for dismissing the significance of widespread long waiting lists: surely parents wouldn't put their names on multiple lists if they were confident they'd get into the centre they'd prefer.

The fact that lists are out of date and duplicated also adds stress to parents trying to return to work or study. As one respondent said: "There is so much duplication ... you don't really know what realistic chance you have of getting in by the date that you require it for."

TABLE 1. PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED WITH DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHILDCARE

Problem	Percentage who experienced the problem		
	Commercial (467 respondents)	Community / not-for-profit (289)	Family daycare (130)
High cost	51	17	12
High staff turnover	26	18	2
Too many children being looked after at once	22	12	12
Not enough staff	18	11	5
Fundraising for the centre **(A)**	13	26	4
Parking when dropping off or picking up children	13	22	5
Unsuitability of staff (not qualified or inexperienced)	13	7	9
Opening / closing times	11	16	15
Old or inadequate premises	9	12	5
Old or inadequate equipment	8	8	9
Difficult access for prams / strollers	7	6	5
Unhealthy or inadequate food	6	4	2
Security of premises **(B)**	5	3	7

(A) *For example, having to sell chocolates to raise money for new equipment.*
(B) *For example, stranger access; children can get out unobserved; no childproof gates.*

WHO'S USING WHAT AND WHY?

"I had to accept a centre that I'm not comfortable with as that was the only one available." Donna, NSW.
"It's not about us choosing the best place for our child, more we have to take what we can get, if anything!" Cherry, NSW.
"Everything is owned by ABC." Greg, SA.
"I've always found ... a [daycare centre] spot immediately. I've used three separate daycares and have always gone back to ABC." Phoebe, Queensland.

A commercial childcare centre was the most common type used by our respondents: 57% said they'd used one, while 35% said they'd used community-based/not-for-profit centres and 16% family daycare (some had used more than one type).

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS WHO EXPERIENCED PROBLEMS FINDING CHILDCARE*

Problem	Overall average (%)**	ACT (48 respondents)	NSW (427)	Queensland (216)	SA (75)	Victoria (298)	WA (134)	Capital cities (960)	Regional areas (275)
Long waiting lists	64	79	66	73	56	65	49	68	51
Lack of choice of which days	44	48	45	47	48	39	45	45	39
Lack of choice of number of days	38	42	43	38	27	35	35	40	32
Lack of choice of type of childcare	28	21	27	34	23	29	28	28	28
Lack of choice of hours	18	10	21	17	16	17	22	19	17
Difficulty getting childcare outside normal working hours	14	4	18	10	5	13	18	14	15
People behind you on the waiting list getting places before you	12	10	11	16	7	13	8	12	9

* *Results for the Northern Territory (12 respondents) and Tasmania (25) aren't reported on a state basis because the number of respondents from each wasn't large enough to give an accurate representation.*
** *Based on 1239 respondents, including the NT and Tasmania.*

TABLE 3. REASONS FOR CHOOSING THE TYPE OF CHILDCARE (%)

Reason	Commercial (467 respondents)	Community / not-for-profit (289)	Family daycare (130)
Convenient location	73	71	51
Good premises	60	53	40
Quality of staff	52	72	55
The only one available	45	28	29
Was recommended to me	37	44	44
Convenient times to drop off and pick up	32	26	33
Good parking	17	11	10
Other	10	13	26
Cost	9	24	49

THE CHOICE SURVEY

1239 people around Australia responded to our email survey, which we sent out to readers of our 'baby' newsletter. While most of the respondents were CHOICE or CHOICE Online subscribers, 38% weren't. All our respondents had looked for and/or used childcare for children aged from birth to six years old.

Our initial research indicated that the most commonly used types of paid childcare for this age group were long-day care (community-based/not-for-profit or commercial centres) and family daycare (where a carer, supported by a co-ordination and resource unit usually provided by a local council or community group, cares for children in the carer's own home). When our survey asked about commercial childcare it didn't differentiate between small for-profit businesses and corporate, publicly listed ones.

88% of those who completed the survey were women, and 74% of respondents were aged 30–39. We received responses from people living in all states and territories of Australia.

Other options our respondents had used included family and friends (quite a large 28%, which may in itself say something about the availability and cost of other childcare), a live-in or live-out nanny or undefined 'other' type.

Users of all three major kinds of publicly available childcare said recommendations from others influenced their choices, and convenient location was not surprisingly a significant factor in the decision too.

Users of family daycare (where children are cared for in a private home, usually under a system run by the local council or other community group) were significantly more likely to have chosen this form of childcare because of cost (49%).

73% of those who'd used commercial childcare said they'd chosen it for its convenient location (it was the highest-rating reason for this type). Another high-rating reason for using commercial childcare was good premises (60%).

However, significantly more commercial childcare users (45%) said they'd chosen this type of care because it was the only one available, compared to 28% of community-based/not-for-profit childcare users and 29% of family daycare users. This suggests some parents may be choosing a commercial childcare centre because there's no other option available, rather than out of choice.

Survey respondents showed more confidence in the quality of staff in community-based/not-for-profit childcare and family daycare than for commercial daycare: 72% of the former and 55% of the latter nominated it as a reason for choosing this type of care — it was the highest-rating reason for choosing these two types. 52% of commercial centre users named quality of staff as a reason for choosing them (a significant difference in this survey), in this case well behind convenient location and good premises.

Table 3, above left, summarises these findings.

THE QUESTION OF STAFF

"I've been very happy with the community-based centre I now use … parents have a say, staff are very dedicated and amazingly stay (high [staff] turnover is a big problem in many centres)." Frances, NSW.

"When I looked at childcare facilities I was alarmed at the small number of staff catering for a big number of children. So many babies and toddlers were wandering around aimlessly looking for attention from their carers, who were too busy to notice." Megan, Victoria.

Experts say children learn best and feel most secure when they're able to develop relationships with their carers. Good staff-to-child ratios are essential in order for relationships between children and their carers to be formed. The presence of

qualified staff (including early childhood teachers) is also important to help children's cognitive and social development.

Staff-to-child ratios are regulated by state governments. Some experts we spoke to voiced concerns that the current legal ratios aren't adequate. This is especially a concern for under-twos, where the legal ratio is one carer to five babies or toddlers, except in Queensland and Tasmania, where it's one to four.

Many of our respondents seemed to share these concerns, reporting problems with too many children being looked after at once and high staff turnover. These problems were reported significantly more often by users of commercial daycare than community-based/not-for-profit care and family daycare (see Table 1), although high staff turnover was also seen as something of a problem in community-based/not-for-profit centres.

A recent survey (conducted by Dr Emma Rush from the Australia Institute) of 578 childcare staff from childcare centres around Australia suggests there's a link between quality care and the care provider. This study divided childcare into three types of provider: community-based (including all not-for-profit centres); independent private (for-profit small businesses); and corporate chains (for-profit publicly listed corporations).

It looked at factors indicating quality, including time staff had to develop relationships with children, whether the centre's program met children's

COULDN'T FIND A PLACE

KARE ROSS

Sharon, from Marrickville in Sydney's inner west, says she was looking at childcare centres "...before I booked the obstetrician ... in this area you have to get your name down early." She was warned by the council, though, that she probably wouldn't get a place in long-day care because of high demand.

She looked at a number of centres, choosing them by word of mouth. "I always asked about staff turnover, as I think continuity of care is what counts, not shiny pretty toys."

After her daughter Olivia was born, Sharon also put her name down for family daycare. She was offered three places to choose from — one was already gone by the time she called and the other two were unsuitable for her daughter.

Sharon's employer was willing to be flexible, and she arranged some informal care with her mother-in-law and a friend. In the end, though, she wasn't able to guarantee that she would always be available to work enough days in the office every week, even part-time, and so had to resign.

Although she can freelance from home, Sharon admits her income is erratic. "It would've been tough financially and professionally if I hadn't been able to find informal care and work freelance."

Sharon thinks governments and local councils are short-sighted and inconsistent: "Given that many professional couples in their 30s had bought homes around the inner west of Sydney, the need for childcare in the area should've been obvious. And the Federal Government wants people to have children, but they're not supporting them when they do."

What to look for

- Experts strongly advise parents to visit prospective childcare services more than once, and spend time observing how the staff interact with the children and how the centre (or home if it's family daycare) is run. Do the children seem happy and engaged in activities, or do they look bored? Does the centre or home look like a happy place to be? Are you and your child welcome? Are staff engaged with the children or sitting around chatting to each other? Do they appear to know the children well?
- Ask questions about how your child will be taken care of and how their needs will be met.
- You should be welcome to drop in and see your child any time. Experts recommend you visit unannounced from time to time.
- Ask about staff turnover, what the child-to-staff ratio is for your child's age group, and how many children are in each room or group. Ask about age and qualifications in each room. Are any of the staff's qualifications related to early childhood?
- If the centre provides food, ask to see the menu. How often is it changed? Can it cater for special dietary requests? Are quantities adequate, and are enough fresh fruit and vegetables served? Are meal and snack times enjoyable?
- Check that the equipment and play spaces are safe.
- Both long-day care centres and family daycarers are assessed by the National Childcare Accreditation Council. You can find out how a centre or carer went in their assessment by asking the centre (or the co-ordination unit, if you're using family daycare) to show you their Quality Profile Certificate. Don't be afraid to ask questions about their results.
- Our survey respondents recommended putting your child's name down at a centre as early as possible — before they're born — and regularly checking with the centre to see if a vacancy has come up.
- The National Childcare Accreditation Council has published a brochure for parents called *Choosing quality childcare* — see *Useful contacts*, page 17.

individual needs and interests, equipment quality, quality and quantity of food, staff turnover and staff-to-child ratios.

The results of this study suggest that while most staff considered the quality of care in their centre to be quite high, when comparing ratings staff gave to their centre, community-based centres provided the highest-quality care, followed by independent private centres. The survey results suggested that corporate childcare offered the lowest quality of care — particularly in terms of the ability of staff to form relationships with children.

We talked to one large corporate provider of childcare, ABC Learning, which owns about 20% of the commercial childcare market. We asked it to respond to criticism that corporate centres provide a lower quality of care because they're driven by profits. Its spokesperson thought this argument was "illogical", saying ABC Learning needs to maintain high occupancy in order to be a successful company and therefore needs to provide high-quality care to make sure parents continue to send their children to its centres.

Our survey results don't completely support this argument. While many respondents said they were happy with the care provided by commercial childcare centres, 45% of those who used one said they chose it because it was the only one available to them. In other words, they were driven by necessity rather than a perception of quality.

MOVES TO ENSURE QUALITY

Although childcare centres have to be licensed by a state or territory government authority, the quality assurance of childcare providers is a Federal Government responsibility. The Childcare Compliance Strategy is a recent Federal Government initiative to further improve childcare quality assurance. It includes the introduction of unannounced spot-checks of childcare centres and family daycare, and unannounced validation visits (where validators visit the service to check it's abiding by quality practices). This will prevent childcare providers being able to prepare in advance for inspections. All experts we spoke to on this subject applauded this move — as one pointed out: "The quality of care should be good every day."

Experts in the field have also suggested a number of measures to ensure quality, such as reforming existing systems, strengthening training and qualifications of staff, tightening regulations, lowering the child-to-staff ratio (especially for children under two) and improving conditions and remuneration to attract and retain staff. Childcare workers are generally acknowledged to be poorly paid.

However, the money to invest in all this has to

BELINDA SOULE

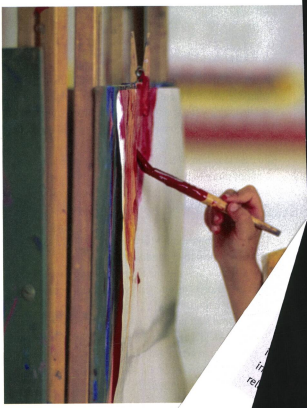
VERY HAPPY WITH QUALITY OF CARE

Glen from Dubbo, NSW, has used a council-run childcare centre for his two-year-old daughter Sophie since she was seven months old. Glen and his wife Merryn originally used family daycare. Although they liked her being in a home environment, they eventually decided to change Sophie to a long-day care centre run by the council, as they thought it would improve her development.

"Sophie loves going to daycare," says Glen. "The carers are very good — we're happy with them all." He's also pleased that Sophie's carers can tell him what she's been up to all day "...off the top of their heads, so they take notice — they take part in her development."

Merryn and Glen put Sophie's name on the centre's waiting list while she was still in family daycare. When they decided to put her into the centre, it wasn't too difficult. The main problem was getting the days they wanted — Merryn had to change her days at work to suit the centre.

"We weren't too concerned about cost," said Glen. "We wanted quality care. We checked it out first — how rooms were set out, activities... the amount of kids... we'd also heard good things about the centre."



come from somewhere. Experts point out that if carers were paid on a par for what they do, childcare would cost even more. Who should carry these costs, though, still seems unresolved. Many experts think childcare should be provided by the community/not-for-profit sector, funded by the government. Our respondents generally supported the idea of more government funding for childcare (see *More government support*, page 18).

THE COST OF CARING

"Childcare costs too much and the money I make from working barely covers the cost." Christine, WA.
"Still in shock that it will cost more for childcare than it will to put my children through private school." Tim, Victoria.
"I just want to point out that $50–$60 per day (10 hours) to look after a child is very cheap. I don't believe that childcare is too expensive. I would happily pay more to know that my child is well looked after while I go to work." Rebecca, WA.
"When the government offers a rebate it seems all the daycare centres then put the price up — so in effect the rebate is of no use!" Leah, NSW.

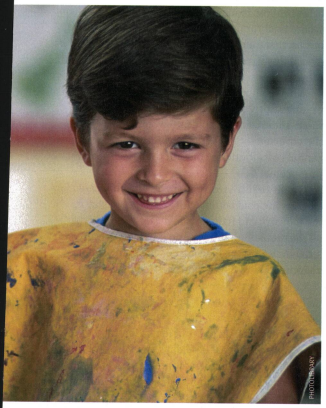
High cost was among the top problems listed by survey respondents for all kinds of publicly available childcare — it was the biggest problem by a long chalk for users of commercial centres, and equal second even for users of usually cheaper family daycare (see Table 1).

Only 17% of parents using community-based/not-for-profit childcare listed cost as a problem, though it was still fourth on their list. However, the corollary to this was 26% of this group saying they have to fundraise for the centre.

To assist families with the cost of childcare, the Federal Government introduced the means-tested Child Care Benefit (CCB) in 2000. This benefit initially made childcare more affordable. However, research indicates that rises in childcare fees in recent years have been greater than the CCB subsidy, which has made childcare less affordable again for many families.

On top of the CCB, the Federal Government introduced the Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR) in 2004, whereby families claiming the CCB can also claim 30% of what they pay for childcare (less their CCB) against their income tax. The maximum rebate is $4000 per child, which parents couldn't initially claim until the 2005/06 financial year. The CCTR can only reduce the amount of tax a person owes to zero — so you won't receive any excess as a refund once your tax is reduced to nil.

As no-one has been able to claim their rebate until recently, it's too early to know what effect the rebate will have on family finances. However, some experts



USEFUL CONTACTS

- **Childcare Access Hotline** (for information on childcare vacancies, childcare services in your area, quality issues, types of childcare and government assistance with childcare cost). The line is open Monday to Friday, 8 am to 9 pm EST; freecall 1800 670 305.
- **National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC):** www.ncac.gov.au or call 1300 136 554 (local call cost) Monday to Friday, 8.30 am to 5 pm EST.
- **Family Day Care Australia:** www.familydaycare.com.au; freecall 1800 670 305.
- **National Association of Community Based Children's Services (NACBCS):** www.nacbcs.org.au; phone (03) 9486 3455.
- **Childcare Association Australia:** www.childcareaust.org.au; see the website for various telephone contacts in each state.
- **Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs:** 'Information for Families about Child Care' at www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/childcare/families-nav.htm.
- **State/territory government contacts:** If you think a childcare centre is in breach of regulatory requirements (for example, it's short-staffed, or the building is unsafe), you can complain to the state or territory body that licenses the centre. For a list of contacts for state and territory licensing authorities, go to www.ncac.gov.au/links/state_licensing_index.html.

doubt the extent of its value to lower and middle-income families. It's of most benefit to families on high incomes who are receiving a lower CCB and are taxed at a higher rate. Critics also point out that many parents can't afford to wait until the following financial year to receive their rebate.

MORE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

"The government should increase funding to allow centres to increase wages, thereby ensuring quality carers at all centres." Darren, Victoria.
"I think people should pay for their own childcare instead of expecting taxpayers to subsidise their lifestyle choices." Anne, NSW.
"Assistance should be given to people who choose to stay home with their children." Lisa, Queensland.

Most of our respondents who'd used childcare in the past two years thought government should increase funding of childcare, by investing more for the provision of care as well as offering assistance to parents to help reduce its cost (see Figures 1 and 2, right).

Some respondents also said they thought government should supply funding for community-based/not-for-profit centres to increase the choice available to parents. Experts also suggest government should provide land at cheaper rates for such centres to be built.

Many respondents weren't happy that childcare had become such a money-maker for big business, especially given carers are so poorly paid. Some thought increased government funding should go towards improving workers' wages. A recent expert workshop on childcare policy supports wage increases for carers to help retain staff and pay them appropriately for the work they do. It also advised that government become involved in workforce planning to deal with childcare staff shortages, and that staff-to-child ratios be increased (which would also require more money).

Our survey respondents also wanted more help from the government to cover their out-of-pocket costs for childcare. There were a few comments, however (such as the one quoted above), from parents who'd prefer government to help them afford to stay at home with their child for at least the first 18 months. Some said they'd prefer paid parental leave over the current Maternity Payment they receive when their child is born.

FIGURE 1. Percentage of respondents who have used childcare in the past two years who agree with the statement: "The government should put more funding into childcare to reduce the cost to parents"

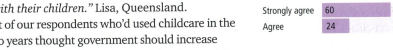
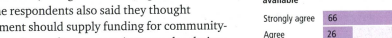


FIGURE 2. Percentage of respondents who have used childcare in the past two years who agree with the statement: "The government should put more funding into childcare to make more places available"



CHOICE'S VERDICT

It's a hard decision for most parents to put their very young children into childcare. Many have to, in order to go back to work for financial reasons, and others choose to in order to stay in a career and help secure their future. They shouldn't then find, on top of this, that their choice of childcare is limited and its availability uncertain, the quality is questionable and the cost almost (or sometimes completely) prohibitive.

While commercially run centres can mushroom as long as private investment is available to fund them, the **choice** of childcare won't increase unless the government puts greater direct investment into capital costs for more community-based/not-for-profit centres.

Quality of care won't improve until childcare workers are paid better, with incentives to stay in the industry and reduce its high staff turnover, with all the problems it brings. And if parents are already struggling with the high **cost** of childcare, simply charging more for it to fund these changes won't work.

CHOICE's survey respondents who've used childcare are certainly in no doubt that it's a government responsibility to put more funding into childcare to help fix the problems identified in the survey. Few families these days have the option of not using childcare, so guaranteeing its quality and availability is simply an investment in the future of the country. ■

PHOTOLIBRARY

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- Check that the equipment and play spaces are safe.
- Both long-day care centres and family daycarers are assessed by the National Childcare Accreditation Council. You can find out how a centre or carer went in their assessment by asking the centre (or the co-ordination unit, if you're using family daycare) to show you their Quality Profile Certificate. Don't be afraid to ask questions about their results.
- Our survey respondents recommended putting your child's name down at a centre as early as possible — before they're born — and regularly checking with the centre to see if a vacancy has come up.
- The National Childcare Accreditation Council has published a brochure for parents called *Choosing quality childcare* — see *Useful contacts*, page 17.

individual needs and interests, equipment quality, quality and quantity of food, staff turnover and staff-to-child ratios.

The results of this study suggest that while most staff considered the quality of care in their centre to be quite high, when comparing ratings staff gave to their centre, community-based centres provided the highest-quality care, followed by independent private centres. The survey results suggested that corporate childcare offered the lowest quality of care — particularly in terms of the ability of staff to form relationships with children.

We talked to one large corporate provider of childcare, ABC Learning, which owns about 20% of the commercial childcare market. We asked it to respond to criticism that corporate centres provide a lower quality of care because they're driven by profits. Its spokesperson thought this argument was "illogical", saying ABC Learning needs to maintain high occupancy in order to be a successful company and therefore needs to provide high-quality care to make sure parents continue to send their children to its centres.

Our survey results don't completely support this argument. While many respondents said they were happy with the care provided by commercial childcare centres, 45% of those who used one said they chose it because it was the only one available to them. In other words, they were driven by necessity rather than a perception of quality.

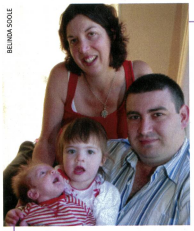
MOVES TO ENSURE QUALITY

Although childcare centres have to be licensed by a state or territory government authority, the quality assurance of childcare providers is a Federal Government responsibility. The Childcare Compliance Strategy is a recent Federal Government initiative to further improve childcare quality assurance. It includes the introduction of unannounced spot-checks of childcare centres and family daycare, and unannounced validation visits (where validators visit the service to check it's abiding by quality practices). This will prevent childcare providers being able to prepare in advance for inspections. All experts we spoke to on this subject applauded this move — as one pointed out: "The quality of care should be good every day."

Experts in the field have also suggested a number of measures to ensure quality, such as reforming existing systems, strengthening training and qualifications of staff, tightening regulations, lowering the child-to-staff ratio (especially for children under two) and improving conditions and remuneration to attract and retain staff. Childcare workers are generally acknowledged to be poorly paid.

However, the money to invest in all this has to

BELINDA SOOLE



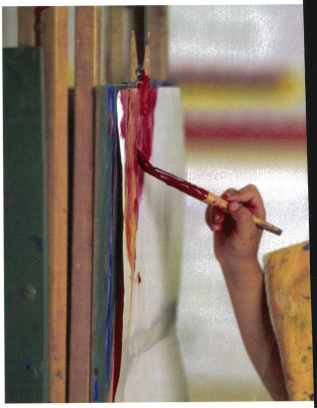
VERY HAPPY WITH QUALITY OF CARE

Glen from Dubbo, NSW, has used a council-run childcare centre for his two-year-old daughter Sophie since she was seven months old. Glen and his wife Merryn originally used family daycare. Although they liked her being in a home environment, they eventually decided to change Sophie to a long-day care centre run by the council, as they thought it would improve her development.

"Sophie loves going to daycare," says Glen. "The carers are very good — we're happy with them all." He's also pleased that Sophie's carers can tell him what she's been up to all day "...off the top of their heads, so they take notice — they take part in her development."

Merryn and Glen put Sophie's name on the centre's waiting list while she was still in family daycare. When they decided to put her into the centre, it wasn't too difficult. The main problem was getting the days they wanted — Merryn had to change her days at work to suit the centre.

"We weren't too concerned about cost," said Glen. "We wanted quality care. We checked it out first — how rooms were set out, activities... the amount of kids... we'd also heard good things about the centre."



come from somewhere. Experts point out that if carers were paid on a par for what they do, childcare would cost even more. Who should carry these costs, though, still seems unresolved. Many experts think childcare should be provided by the community/not-for-profit sector, funded by the government. Our respondents generally supported the idea of more government funding for childcare (see *More government support*, page 18).

THE COST OF CARING

"Childcare costs too much and the money I make from working barely covers the cost." Christine, WA.
"Still in shock that it will cost more for childcare than it will to put my children through private school." Tim, Victoria.
"I just want to point out that $50–$60 per day (10 hours) to look after a child is very cheap. I don't believe that childcare is too expensive. I would happily pay more to know that my child is well looked after while I go to work." Rebecca, WA.
"When the government offers a rebate it seems all the daycare centres then put the price up — so in effect the rebate is of no use!" Leah, NSW.

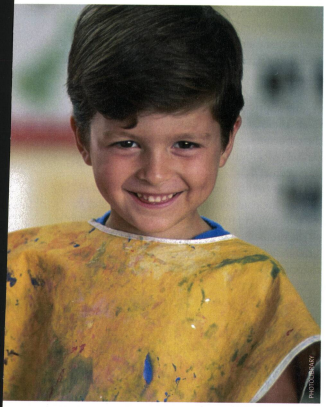
High cost was among the top problems listed by survey respondents for all kinds of publicly available childcare — it was the biggest problem by a long chalk for users of commercial centres, and equal second even for users of usually cheaper family daycare (see Table 1).

Only 17% of parents using community-based/not-for-profit childcare listed cost as a problem, though it was still fourth on their list. However, the corollary to this was 26% of this group saying they have to fundraise for the centre.

To assist families with the cost of childcare, the Federal Government introduced the means-tested Child Care Benefit (CCB) in 2000. This benefit initially made childcare more affordable. However, research indicates that rises in childcare fees in recent years have been greater than the CCB subsidy, which has made childcare less affordable again for many families.

On top of the CCB, the Federal Government introduced the Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR) in 2004, whereby families claiming the CCB can also claim 30% of what they pay for childcare (less their CCB) against their income tax. The maximum rebate is $4000 per child, which parents couldn't initially claim until the 2005/06 financial year. The CCTR can only reduce the amount of tax a person owes to zero — so you won't receive any excess as a refund once your tax is reduced to nil.

As no-one has been able to claim their rebate until recently, it's too early to know what effect the rebate will have on family finances. However, some experts



USEFUL CONTACTS

- **Childcare Access Hotline** (for information on childcare vacancies, childcare services in your area, quality issues, types of childcare and government assistance with childcare cost). The line is open Monday to Friday, 8 am to 9 pm EST; freecall 1800 670 305.
- **National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC):** www.ncac.gov.au or call 1300 136 554 (local call cost) Monday to Friday, 8.30 am to 5 pm EST.
- **Family Day Care Australia:** www.familydaycare.com.au; freecall 1800 670 305.
- **National Association of Community Based Children's Services (NACBCS):** www.nacbcs.org.au; phone (03) 9486 3455.
- **Childcare Association Australia:** www.childcareaust.org.au; see the website for various telephone contacts in each state.
- **Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs:** 'Information for Families about Child Care' at www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/childcare/families-nav.htm.
- **State/territory government contacts:** If you think a childcare centre is in breach of regulatory requirements (for example, it's short-staffed, or the building is unsafe), you can complain to the state or territory body that licenses the centre. For a list of contacts for state and territory licensing authorities, go to www.ncac.gov.au/links/state_licensing_index.html.

doubt the extent of its value to lower and middle-income families. It's of most benefit to families on high incomes who are receiving a lower CCB and are taxed at a higher rate. Critics also point out that many parents can't afford to wait until the following financial year to receive their rebate.

MORE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

"The government should increase funding to allow centres to increase wages, thereby ensuring quality carers at all centres." Darren, Victoria.
"I think people should pay for their own childcare instead of expecting taxpayers to subsidise their lifestyle choices." Anne, NSW.
"Assistance should be given to people who choose to stay home with their children." Lisa, Queensland.

Most of our respondents who'd used childcare in the past two years thought government should increase funding of childcare, by investing more for the provision of care as well as offering assistance to parents to help reduce its cost (see Figures 1 and 2, right).

Some respondents also said they thought government should supply funding for community-based/not-for-profit centres to increase the choice available to parents. Experts also suggest government should provide land at cheaper rates for such centres to be built.

Many respondents weren't happy that childcare had become such a money-maker for big business, especially given carers are so poorly paid. Some thought increased government funding should go towards improving workers' wages. A recent expert workshop on childcare policy supports wage increases for carers to help retain staff and pay them appropriately for the work they do. It also advised that government become involved in workforce planning to deal with childcare staff shortages, and that staff-to-child ratios be increased (which would also require more money).

Our survey respondents also wanted more help from the government to cover their out-of-pocket costs for childcare. There were a few comments, however (such as the one quoted above), from parents who'd prefer government to help them afford to stay at home with their child for at least the first 18 months. Some said they'd prefer paid parental leave over the current Maternity Payment they receive when their child is born.

FIGURE 1. Percentage of respondents who have used childcare in the past two years who agree with the statement: "The government should put more funding into childcare to reduce the cost to parents"

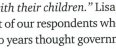
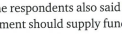


FIGURE 2. Percentage of respondents who have used childcare in the past two years who agree with the statement: "The government should put more funding into childcare to make more places available"



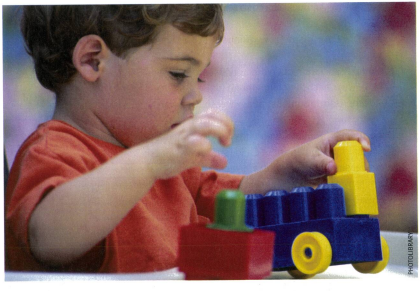
CHOICE'S VERDICT

It's a hard decision for most parents to put their very young children into childcare. Many have to, in order to go back to work for financial reasons, and others choose to in order to stay in a career and help secure their future. They shouldn't then find, on top of this, that their choice of childcare is limited and its availability uncertain, the quality is questionable and the cost almost (or sometimes completely) prohibitive.

While commercially run centres can mushroom as long as private investment is available to fund them, the **choice** of childcare won't increase unless the government puts greater direct investment into capital costs for more community-based/not-for-profit centres.

Quality of care won't improve until childcare workers are paid better, with incentives to stay in the industry and reduce its high staff turnover, with all the problems it brings. And if parents are already struggling with the high **cost** of childcare, simply charging more for it to fund these changes won't work.

CHOICE's survey respondents who've used childcare are certainly in no doubt that it's a government responsibility to put more funding into childcare to help fix the problems identified in the survey. Few families these days have the option of not using childcare, so guaranteeing its quality and availability is simply an investment in the future of the country. ■


PHOTOLIBRARY

Endless summer

Getting the bronzed look without the harmful rays.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On trial: 21 self-tanning products,** *ranging in price from $4.67 to $41 per 100 mL. Our results show that a big name or a higher price is no guarantee of how much you'll like a product.*
- **You'll find lotions,** *pump sprays, aerosols, towelettes, gels and mousses, but the trialists didn't consistently prefer any type over another.*

With summer just around the corner, it's time to toss off your winter woollies and get into your shorts and swimmers. But if the thought of baring your pale limbs fills you with dread, you might be planning to use a sunless tanning product. With the right one you can achieve an instant bronzed glow, without exposing yourself to harmful UV rays. But choose the wrong one and the results can be a disaster.

To help you decide, our trialists checked out 21 widely available self-tanning products. They reported how easy the products are to apply, how long they take to dry, if they have a nice smell, whether they stained anything other than their skin, how the colour looked one and five days after application and how even the colour was. Then they gave the products an overall score.

While some of the pricier products rated highly, a few cheaper options also did well, including **GARNIER Ambre Solaire No Streaks Bronzer** — our Best Buy at $13.20 for 100 mL.

ORANGE ALERT

We've all seen the result of a bad fake tan that's left a poor soul looking more Fanta orange than beautifully bronzed.

The good news is our trialists found most products they tried produced just about the right colour of tan, although the **MONNÉ Express Tan Spray** was generally found to be a little too dark.

Several brands were found to be a little too light, but this isn't a problem if you're going for a subtle look, and you can always apply another layer later to deepen the colour.

Our trialists also thought **CLARINS Instant Gel** and **AVEDA Sun Source** produced a very natural colour one day after application.

Perhaps the only thing worse than ending up orange is ending up orange *and* stripy. The best way to help you get an even tan is to exfoliate properly first (see *Tanning tips*, page 21).

Our trialists thought **CLARINS**, **AVEDA** and **BANANA BOAT Instant Sunless** produced a very even tan one day after application.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

WHAT TO BUY

ELLA BACHÉ Great Tan Without Sun	$27.69 per 100 mL
LANCÔME Soleil Flash Bronzer Mousse	$33.33 per 100 mL
GARNIER Ambre Solaire No Streaks Bronzer ◀ BEST BUY ▶	$13.20 per 100 mL

Profiles

The products in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

ELLA BACHÉ GREAT TAN WITHOUT SUN

Price: $36 ($27.69 per 100 mL)
Rating it equal highest overall, most of our trialists thought this product gave a fairly even tan. Several people said they liked the product being tinted so you could see where you'd applied it straightaway.

TRIALIST COMMENT:

"Applied well, not too thick and you could see where you applied it. I would use this product again."

LANCÔME SOLEIL FLASH BRONZER MOUSSE

Price: $50 ($33.33 per 100 mL)
This product was also rated equal highest overall. Most trialists found it very easy to apply and it had the highest proportion of trialists say that the tan still looked very natural five days after application.

TRIALIST COMMENTS:

"Very light and easy to apply. I'm confident of an even application."

"Fast to develop colour and not greasy ... Faded very evenly and naturally."

GARNIER AMBRE SOLAIRE NO-STREAKS BRONZER

Price: $16.50 ($13.20 per 100 mL) BEST BUY
This product didn't rate quite as highly overall as the top two (it scored 70% rather than 80%), but it's less than half the price. Most trialists thought it was very easy to apply and gave a fairly even and natural tan.

TRIALIST COMMENT:

"This was easy — not streaky, no mess, dried instantly."

Product (in rank order)	1 Overall s (%)
ELLA BACHÉ Great Tan Without Sun	80
LANCÔME Soleil Flash Bronzer Mousse	80
CLARINS Instant Gel	70
CLINIQUE Self-sun Quick Bronze Tinted (deep)	70
GARNIER Ambre Solaire No-Streaks Bronzer Spray	70
SHISEIDO Brilliant Bronze Emulsion	70
ST TROPEZ Whipped Bronze Instant Mousse	70
AVEDA Sun Source	60
BANANA BOAT Instant Sunless Tanning Lotion (light / medium)	60
CHRISTIAN DIOR Bronze Spray	60
INNOXA Sun Defence Mousse	60
LE TAN Fast — Le Tan in Le Can (bronze glow)	60
L'OREAL Sublime Bronze Multi-position Anti-streaking Spray	60
NEUTROGENA Instant Bronze Sunless Tanner Foam (medium)	60
ESTÉE LAUDER Sun Performance Sunless Towelettes	50
MONNÉ Express Tan Spray	50
NIVEA Sun — Sun Touch Moisturising Spray	50
PRICELINE Sun Gel	50
MEGAN GALE Jet Set Tan	40
MODEL CO Tan Airbrush in a Can	40
NATIO Instant Bronze Tanning Gel	40

* *Recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in July/August 2006.*

(A) *This price is for 120 mL; it's also available in 240 mL for $59.95 ($24.98 per 100 mL).*

(B) *This price is for 150 mL; it's also available in 220 mL for $45 ($20.45 per 100 mL).*

1 Overall score
The trialists gave each product an overall rating out of 10, which we converted to a percentage (rounded to the nearest 10). An overall score takes into account the trialist's

NOT A SUNSCREEN

Self-tanning products don't protect you from exposure to the sun. None of the products in this trial contains sunscreen, but even fake tans that do only provide short-term protection for two to four hours after application, not for the length of time the tan remains on the skin.

DURATION

Don't expect your tan to last more than a few days without reapplying. Most of the products on trial don't make any claims about their durability and trialists found most of them didn't last for five days with only one application. Of the products on trial, **LANCÔME Soleil Flash Bronzer Mousse** rated best for retaining a very natural and even-looking tan after five days.

SCENT

Our trialists had some very different ideas about how the products smell — it's clearly a very personal preference. For example, one trialist commented that one of the products had an unpleasant "chemical hair product" smell, while another didn't think it had any smell at all. However, the highest proportion of trialists thought **SHISHEIDO Brilliant Bronze, NIVEA Sun — Sun Touch, PRICELINE Sun Gel** and **AVEDA** had a very pleasant fragrance.

STAINING

Fake tans can stain towels, clothes, bed linen and carpets. The **MODEL CO Tan Airbrush** had the highest proportion of trialists saying it stained something other than their skin during or after its application. Like many of the fake tans, this product does have a warning on its packaging that it will stain some materials, so it's a good idea not to wear light-coloured or expensive clothes immediately after applying any tan.

DRYING TIMES

Drying times varied between products. **INNOXA Sun Defence** and **NEUTROGENA Instant Bronze** were found to dry in less than one minute by the highest proportion of trialists.

At the other end of the scale, **L'OREAL Sublime Bronze** and **PRICELINE** were found to take 20 minutes or longer to dry more often than the other products. ■

atings

y to apply	Looked even (1 day after application)	Looked natural (1 day after application)	Darkness	Type of product	Price ($)*	3 Price per 100 mL or g ($)
rly	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Lotion	36.00	27.69
ry	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Mousse	50.00	33.33
irly	Very	Very	A little too light	Gel	40.00	33.33
ry	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Gel	30.00	24.00
ry	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Aerosol	16.50	13.20
ry	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Lotion	41.00	41.00
irly	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Mousse	39.95 **(A)**	33.29
ery	Very	Very	A little too light	Lotion	39.95	26.63
irly	Very	Fairly	A little too light	Lotion	14.95	8.90
irly	Mixed opinions	Fairly	About right	Pump spray	42.00	33.60
ery	Fairly	Fairly	A little too light	Mousse	19.95	11.40
irly	Mixed opinions	Fairly	About right	Aerosol	16.95	9.69
irly	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Aerosol	20.75	16.60
Fairly	Fairly	Fairly	A little too light	Mousse	23.00	19.49
Fairly	Fairly	Fairly	A little too light	Towelettes	51.00	34.00
Mixed opinions	Mixed opinions	Mixed opinions	A little too dark	Aerosol	16.95	11.30
Fairly	Fairly	Fairly	A little too light	Pump spray	19.25	12.83
Fairly	Mixed opinions	Mixed opinions	About right	Gel	7.00	4.67
Fairly	Mixed opinions	Fairly	About right	Aerosol	34.50	23.00
Mixed opinions	Mixed opinions	Mixed opinions	About right	Aerosol	32.00 **(B)**	21.33
Mixed opinions	Fairly	Fairly	About right	Gel	14.95	9.97

complete experience of a product, which may not be covered by amalgamating the ratings they gave for individual aspects of each self-tanner.

2 Ratings

See page 19 for the individual factors of each product that trialists commented on. We've published the most significant aspects here.

3 Price per 100 mL/g

Self-tanning products come in various sizes, so for comparison we calculated the price per 100 mL/g.

Tanning tips

- Before applying the tan, remove any dry skin and dead skin cells by exfoliating with a body scrub or loofah. Pay particular attention to dry areas such as elbows, knees and ankles. Failing to exfoliate may lead to your tan flaking off prematurely with the dead skin or leave your skin looking cracked and lizardy.
- If it's the first time you've used a product, you might want to test it on a small (and inconspicuous) patch of skin first to see if you like the colour.
- Apply the tan according to the directions on the particular product. Generally, you should use it sparingly around your elbows, knees, ankles and hairline.
- Wear disposable latex gloves to avoid staining your hands.
- A tinted product allows you to see where you've applied it straightaway. Some other products are clear (your skin becomes tanned as the result of a chemical reaction with the product over time) and it can be difficult to judge the evenness of the tan as you're applying it.
- Try to avoid contact with water for about three hours after applying the tan. This includes activities that'll make you sweat, as it could streak the tan.
- If you realise you've had a tanning disaster, there are some self-tan remover products available.

THE TRIAL

Thanks to our trialists, who answered the call to take part in this trial via our website, choice.com.au. Altogether 159 people trialled the 21 self-tanners for us, with products being trialled an average of 15 times.

Each person was sent two products and asked to apply one coat of the first product to the bottom half of their left leg and one coat of the second product to the bottom half of their right leg (fortunately the trial took place in winter). They answered some questions straight after applying the product, and also assessed the colour and evenness of the tan one and five days after application.

Leave it to a pro?

A spray-on tan is a popular alternative to DIY tanning products. This involves an operator spraying the tanning product onto your skin with an airbrush.

You can get it done at a salon, but there are also a number of mobile tanning companies that will come to your home. The operator should get you to stand in the shower while they apply the tan so they can wipe down any excess product afterwards. Some companies bring a portable booth for you to stand in.

It takes around 10–15 minutes for a full-body application and costs between $35 and $50. The tan should last for seven to 10 days.

Play it again

DVD/hard disc recorders can store a lot of TV, but are they easy enough to use?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **While most** *of the low to mid-priced recorders on test scored well for performance, a few were very difficult to use.*
- **DVD recorders** *with a hard disc drive can store a lot of TV, but you have to make a trade-off between storage capacity and picture quality.*
- **Multiple disc formats** *are confusing and a disadvantage for consumers — the industry needs to get its act together fast and simplify the situation.*

The landscape of home entertainment is changing fast. Heading into the sunset are the chunky TVs and video recorders of the past, and coming in are a seemingly endless line of fresh, new technological options. Plasma and LCD screens, digital TV, set-top boxes and DVD/hard disc recorders. It's enough to make your head spin, but if you can get it around the new technology there are plenty of ways to update and improve the way you entertain yourself in the lounge room.

DVD/hard disc recorders give you a flexibility that reaches far beyond a VCR. They have features such as timeshift, which allows you to start watching a recorded program while the end's still being recorded, and with a hard drive you'll have ample storage to record all your favourite shows and watch them when it's convenient for you.

The DVD/hard disc recorders on test can be set to record at highest quality (about one hour's worth of recording on a DVD), mid-quality (about four hours) and low-quality (6–10 hours on a DVD). And when set on low quality you can store anything from 102 to 400 hours of programming on the hard drive. You just need to be disciplined enough to give names to all your recordings before or soon after doing it, otherwise you'll be ploughing through hours of material looking for what you want.

The more data you store, the more the machine has to compress it, which is why it's called low-quality — the picture quality suffers. This is particularly noticeable on a big screen, so it's best not to use the maximum-capacity mode if you're watching your recordings on a screen larger than 60 cm.

HOW DO I USE THIS THING?

Despite the obvious appeal of DVD/hard disc recorders in terms of features, one of the biggest hurdles for most people is user-friendliness — or lack of it. With illogical onscreen menus, complicated remote controls and numerous connections, even the more tech-savvy among us can get a headache.

Fortunately, for the models in the *What to buy* list you might only have difficulties when setting them up, but a couple of the other models tested this time proved very difficult to use. The worst for ease of use, the **PHILIPS DVDR7300H**, provoked the frustrated comment from one panellist that, "The most useful instruction in the book is how to dispose of the recorder — which will be soon."

Well connected on page 25 has an explanation of what's what with all the connections you may need when you're setting up a DVD/hard disc recorder.

As with all relatively new technology, we don't have much information on reliability from brand to brand. So be sure to read the manual and follow the care instructions — don't move it while it's working or place it near extreme heat, for example.

What to look for

- **Remote controls** should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should be grouped so you can quickly go to specific functions, and the most commonly used buttons should be prominent. All should have clear English labels or obvious symbols.
- **Onscreen menus** should be large and easy to read, with a logical structure, so you don't have to resort to the manual to find settings and functions. It's an advantage to have some control over how opaque the menu settings are, so you don't miss anything (on the TV or the menu) if you need to change a setting while your favourite show is on.
- **Written instructions** should be detailed enough, in plain English, that you can easily set up and use the recorder. Clear descriptions and pictures are often very useful, particularly if you're connecting it to a number of other devices.
- **Timeshift, timeslip** or **chase playback** are all names applied to a useful function that frees you from waiting for a recording to finish before you start watching it — so if you come home halfway through a show you're recording, you can watch it from the beginning while it records the end.

In addition, as long as you have timeshift on while you're watching TV, you can just hit the pause button while you answer the phone or make a cuppa. Then, when you're ready, you hit play. The recorder plays from where you paused it, while continuing to record ahead.

Timeshift also allows you to do your own instant replay. With it switched on, if you missed that last brilliant tennis shot, you just hit the back button and watch it, then fast forward to where you were and you don't miss a thing.

All the tested models have timeshift.

- The **number of recording events/types** needs to match your normal recording patterns. Check not only how many events you can set but also what type — individually by date and time, or also daily and/or weekly. All tested models except the **SAMSUNG** allow a daily or weekly repeat of a recording. All let you program 12 or more individual timer recordings — see the table (page 25) for model details. Most allow recordings to be programmed up to one month ahead; the **JVC** and **PHILIPS DVDR3360H** allow up to one year and the **MAGNAVOX** doesn't have a limit.

Other features they (almost) all have

- Menu options for 4:3 letterbox, 4:3 pan & scan and 16:9 screen ratio display (but the actual availability of the feature may depend on the disc being played).
- Picture zoom DVD, except the **JVC, PANASONIC** and **PIONEER.**
- Browser (thumb-nailer) to help you recognise a recording from the image of the first scene.
- Analogue tuner that allows automatic, manual and manual fine tuning of channels; and channel skip or its equivalent.
- Resume play DVD.
- All tested models allow you to copy from the hard disc to a DVD, at either normal or high speed. All models, except for the **MAGNAVOX** and the two **PHILIPS,** also allow copying from a DVD to the hard disc.
- Slide show for still pictures.

Format frustration

If you want to play your recorded DVDs on other DVD players, be aware that different discs won't always work in different machines. That's because of the way data is distributed on DVD, which has been dictated by two competing groups, the DVD Forum and the DVD Alliance. Unfortunately for the consumer, these dictates don't always match.

Here are some of the formats you might come across, and a guide to what it all means:

- **DVD-R:** A write-once disc format (you can only copy onto it once) with 4.7 GB capacity, which is supported by the DVD Forum.
- **DVD-RW:** A rewritable DVD format that can be erased and rewritten, supported by the DVD Forum.
- **DVD+R:** A write-once disc with 4.7 GB capacity that's supported by the DVD Alliance.
- **DVD+RW:** A rewritable DVD format, supported by the DVD Alliance.
- **DVD-Video:** A read-only format usable in all players, commonly used for movies.
- There's also a **PANASONIC**-format DVD RAM, which is physically different from the others and not always supported by non-**PANASONIC** products.

Which formats?	Play	Record
DVD-R **(A)**	All	All
DVD-RW	All	All
DVD+R **(B)**	All	All except JVC and Samsung
DVD+RW	All except Panasonic **(C)**	All except JVC and Samsung
DVD RAM	JVC, LG, Panasonic, Pioneer, Samsung	JVC, LG, Panasonic, Pioneer.
VCD	All	None
SVCD	All except Panasonic **(C)**	None
DVD-audio	JVC, Panasonic **(D)**	None
MPEG 4 / DIVX	All except JVC, Philips DVDR7300H	None

All can play music CDs (CD-R, CD-RW) in both normal music and MP3 format as well as display the JPEG picture format. The LG, NEC, Philips DVDR3360H and Pioneer can also play CDs with WMA format music files.

(A) *The Panasonic and Pioneer can play and record on double-layer discs, which effectively give twice the recording time of a single layer, but cost more. The Panasonic will only do this when recording from the hard drive to DVD.*

(B) *The LG, NEC, Panasonic, Philips DVDR3360H and Pioneer can play and record on double-layer discs.*

(C) *Panasonic says these formats should play, but our test discs wouldn't.*

(D) *Stereo only.*

What to buy

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

LG RH1888H

Price: $649

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent video and audio quality from the inbuilt tuner.
- Suitable for the novice owner, with easy-to-program timer recordings.
- Can record dual-layer DVDs (almost doubles the recording capacity).
- HDMI-out connection (see *Well connected*, far right).

BAD POINTS

- Some evidence of image break-up even with moderate compression (four hours on DVD).
- At maximum capacity (six hours on DVD) there's obvious pixelation and break-up, even though the picture remains sharp.
- Only one analogue stereo audio output.

PANASONIC DMR-EH55

Price: $659

GOOD POINTS

- Can record dual-layer DVDs, but only when recording directly from the hard drive.
- Slot for SD and MMC memory card types.
- The remote has large buttons and bold labels and is uncluttered.

BAD POINTS

- At maximum capacity (eight hours on DVD) pictures show some juddering and appear slightly out of focus.
- Second worst error correction score, so perhaps not the best choice if you hire a lot of DVDs.
- Limited CD playback features.
- Can't play WMA (Windows Media Audio — similar to MP3) audio files.

JVC DR-MH300S

Price: $899

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent video and audio quality from the inbuilt tuner.
- Well spaced and clearly labelled buttons on the remote.
- The handbook was rated best for clarity and diagrams.

BAD POINTS

- At maximum capacity (eight hours on DVD) pictures show some juddering and pixelation.
- Can't play WMA audio or MPEG4 video.
- Expensive.

PIONEER DVR-540H

Price: $699

GOOD POINTS

- Can record dual-layer DVDs.
- The remote has large, well spaced and clearly labelled buttons.
- Useful onscreen help function.

BAD POINTS

- At maximum capacity (10 hours on DVD) pictures show some juddering, pixelation and other picture faults, but our panel thought it was a reasonable result given the extra recording time.
- No DV input.

	PERFORMANCE							
Brand / model (in rank order)	1 **Overall score** (%)	2 **Ease of use score** (%)	3 **Picture quality score** (%)	4 **Sound quality score** (%)	5 **Error correction score** (%)	6 **Standby power score** (%)	7 **TV reception score** (%)	8 **DVD replay score** (%)
LG RH1888H	85	76	80	91	97	96	94	94
PANASONIC DMR-EH55	84	80	82	95	69	94	89	96
JVC DR-MH300S	82	79	78	94	89	76	95	92
PIONEER DVR-540H	81	72	77	92	83	92	89	96
NEC NDH-160	80	75	77	88	77	94	87	86
SAMSUNG DVD-HR735	78	77	74	83	67	87	88	93
PHILIPS DVDR3360H **(A)**	77	58	76	93	95	83	93	96
PHILIPS DVDR7300H **(A)**	74	51	72	92	98	93	89	95
MAGNAVOX MDVDRW80GB **(B)**	72	53	77	85	95	75	75	77

ns *Not stated.*

* *Prices are what we paid in July 2006.*

(A) *Discontinued but may still be available in shops.*

(B) *Discontinued: replaced by a 160 MB model that the distributor says is almost identical.*

1 Overall score

This is a combination of the following:

- Ease of use: 30%
- Picture quality score: 30%
- Sound quality score: 10%
- Error correction score: 10%
- Standby power score: 10%
- TV reception score: 5%
- DVD replay score: 5%

2 Ease of use score

A panel assessed the following:

- Remote control: 30%
- Ease of setting the timer to record the same day and in the future, and finding and renaming a file on the hard drive: 30%
- Instructions: 10%
- Onscreen display: 10%
- Front panel controls: 10%
- Front panel display: 10%

3 Picture quality score

Based on technical tests of the model's ability to produce good-quality pictures recorded and played back from video test signals at the recorder's lowest, mid and highest compression.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **NEC** and **SAMSUNG** are good models that are worth considering if you find either of them selling at a competitive price. Their sound quality isn't quite as good as the models in the *What to buy* list, and the **SAMSUNG** has the lowest score for error correction, making it probably not the best pick if you hire a lot of DVDs.
- The two **PHILIPS** models on test are very difficult to use as well as being expensive. While the **PHILIPS DVDR7300H** has the longest hard disc recording time, our testers didn't find this compensated for the frustration of trying to make it work.
- While the **MAGNAVOX** is much cheaper than the others, our testers found it very difficult to use and scored it comparatively low for sound quality, TV reception and DVD replay.

Well connected

Can't tell composite video from component? Don't stress: here's a guide to the different kinds of video connection and what they're used for. They matter because your DVD/hard disc recorder needs to have connections that match the ones on your TV and any other device you want to connect it to. Note that, apart from SCART and HDMI, they all require separate audio connections.

- **Composite** is found on most modern TVs. The brightness and colour signals are combined into the single video signal.
- **S-video** is identifiable by a small, round, four-pin plug. It provides better picture quality than composite because the brightness and colour signals are kept separate.
- **Component** separates the picture further into brightness and colour signals, providing even better quality. Three video cables are required.
- **RGB** is similar to component but is less common these days.
- **DVI** (digital video interface) can carry digital video signals to a screen that can display them. It's often used to connect a digital camcorder.
- **HDMI** (high-definition multimedia interface) is an all-digital connection for both video and sound in one cable. HDMI connections can accept DVI input, if you have a special cable, but you have to connect sound separately.
- **SCART** (syndicat des constructeurs d'appareils radiorécepteurs et téléviseurs) is also known as a Euroconnector. It's a 21-pin connector for analogue video and sound.

Some of the tested models have multiples of any one type of connection, but they may not be available all at once. To avoid any problems, tally up the number of devices you might want to connect to a recorder at the same time and check with the retailer that this is possible before you buy.

Which connections?	In	Out
TV antenna cable	All	All
Composite video	All	All
S-video	All	All
Component video	None	All
RGB	JVC, Panasonic, Philips DVDR7300H	JVC, Magnavox, Panasonic, Philips DVDR7300H
Digital video (DV)	All except Pioneer	None
HDMI	None	LG, Philips DVDR7300H, Samsung
5.1 Audio	na	Magnavox
Digital audio	na	All **(A)**

All have at least one stereo audio output.
The Panasonic and Philips DVDR7300H have SCART connections, which can carry composite, S-video and RGB signals.
(A) *The Panasonic has optical only. The JVC, Philips DVDR3360H and Pioneer have coaxial only. The rest have both.*

SPECIFICATIONS

9 Hard drive recording (hours, best / worst quality)	Hard drive capacity (MB)	9 DVD recording (hours, best / worst quality)	Quality modes	Timer recordings	Size (W x D x H, mm)	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
43 / 233	160	1 / 6	4	16	430 x 275 x 54	3	Indonesia	LG	649
36 / 284	160	1 / 8	5	32	430 x 329 x 58	1	China	Panasonic	659
34 / 300	160	1 / 8	5	16	435 x 300 x 70	1	China	Hagemeyer	899
34 / 340	160	1 / 10	6	32	420 x 318 x 69	ns	China	Pioneer	699
42 / 226	160	1 / 6	4	16	430 x 350 x 49	1	Indonesia	NEC	899
38 / 272	160	1 / 8	5	12	430 x 300 x 59	ns	Indonesia	Samsung	749
34 / 204	160	1 / 6	6	20	435 x 340 x 65	3	China	Philips	799
47 / 400	250	1 / 8	7	25	435 x 335 x 76	ns	Hungary	Philips	999
17 / 102	80	1 / 6	6	20	430 x 340 x 55	2	China	Mistral	369

4 Sound quality score

Based on technical tests of the model's ability to produce good-quality sound recorded and played back from audio test signals at the recorder's lowest, mid and highest compression.

5 Error correction score

This checks how well the recorder can handle both a CD and a DVD with imperfections. We played our specially made test discs, which have a range of simulated scratches and dirt. The scores for CD and DVD are equally weighted and the higher the score, the less trouble the machine had playing the discs.

6 Standby power score

We measured the power each machine uses in standby mode or equivalent (when it's been turned off by the remote control but is still connected to the power). The higher the score, the lower the energy consumption on standby.

7 TV reception score

A more sensitive device (with a higher score) will give better reception in areas with weak signals. All these products have a single analogue tuner.

8 DVD replay score

This is based on technical tests of the model's ability to produce good-quality pictures from a commercial DVD.

9 Hard drive and DVD recording times

The number of hours manufacturers claim for highest quality (lowest compression) and lowest quality (highest compression). These are approximations only because actual recording times vary, depending on the nature of the images being recorded. For example, images of grass or trees blowing in the wind are more difficult to compress than a still image like a building.

Mixing it up

Does paying more get you a better food processor?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: Five** *standalone food processors and seven combination food processors/blenders, costing up to $500.*
- **The combination** *models have a lot of functions but tend to be bulky and difficult to store.*

What to buy

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

FOOD PROCESSOR ONLY

MAGIMIX 3100

Price: $499

GOOD POINTS

- Highest performance score (99%).
- The easiest model to use and clean.
- Has a separate storage unit that fits all the accessories.
- Has a mini processor bowl for smaller quantities (see *What to look for*, page 28).
- Can crush ice.
- The quietest model tested.
- 12-year warranty on the motor.

BAD POINTS

- Relatively expensive.

BREVILLE WIZZ PROFESSIONAL BFP600

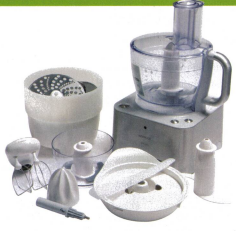
Price: $270 BEST BUY

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance score.
- Can crush ice.
- Considerably cheaper than the other standalone food processors in the *What to buy* list.

BAD POINTS

- Can be difficult to lock the lid into position.
- Can move on the bench while processing.
- No storage for blades.



KENWOOD FP940

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance score.
- Has a mini processor bowl for smaller quantities.
- Easy to use controls and the indicator light shows when it's switched on.
- Has a storage carousel for accessories that fits inside the bowl.

BAD POINTS

- Comparatively heavy, which could get tiring if you can't keep it on the benchtop.
- Its blade storage carousel is heavy and bulky, and can only store two of the four blades at a time.

A food processor can slice, shred, chop and blend foods; some can also mix cakes and knead dough. Add a blender and you can chop nuts and spices, make mayonnaise and crush ice. You can make soup with either of them. Is it worth combining the two products in one?

A standalone food processor comes with plenty of accessories, but with a combo product you get even more. Storage space alone might put you off if you have a small kitchen.

As well as having lots of accessories the combination processors/blenders tend to be bulky and awkward to fit in a cupboard. They're also quite tall when both appliances are in place. On the other hand, some of the standalone food processors in particular are heavy and would also be easier to use if you can leave them out on the kitchen bench.

You'll probably know when you go shopping which kind you want: if you already have a handheld or benchtop blender, for example, there's nothing to be gained by buying a combination appliance — they don't give any better results and simply take up more space. So we've split the results into two groups to make your choice easier.

While you can find a food processor for well under $100, this test looks at the higher end of the market for both standalones and combos. And the fact that most scores in our tests are 70% and over shows many of these models will give you good results.

Our home economist assessed how well the food processors sliced, chopped, mixed, shredded and kneaded various foods, and how well the blenders on the combination models crushed ice, ground nuts, puréed soup and made mayonnaise. If the manufacturer said a food processor had some blender functions, we tested them too. Full results are in the table, page 28.

COMBINATION FOOD PROCESSOR/BLENDER

SUNBEAM CAFÉ SERIES FOOD PROCESSOR LC8900

Price: $369

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance score.
- 10-year warranty on the motor.
- Has a storage drawer in the processor that fits all blades except the slicer.

BAD POINTS

- The heaviest model tested (9 kg with all its accessories stored inside it) — you wouldn't want to have to lift it in and out of a cupboard every time you used it.
- More difficult to keep its stainless steel finish clean.

BRAUN COMBIMAX K750

Price: $180

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance score.
- The slicing blade adjusts to nine different thicknesses.
- Relatively light and compact for a combo.

BAD POINTS

- You can't lock the food processor and blender into position at the same time, which might make it more difficult to store.
- Crevices can be difficult to clean around.
- No storage for accessories.
- Vibrates on the bench when processing/blending some foods at high speed.
- On the tested sample the rubber seal in the blender was loose and came away from the lid.

BREVILLE SUPER WIZZ DUO FP30

Price: $180

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance score.
- Internal storage drawer and side compartment for most blades.

BAD POINTS

- The processor must be locked in place before you can turn the blender on, and vice versa, which is awkward and inconvenient.
- Not very good at crushing ice.
- There's an open vent at the back where spills could get into the motor.
- No storage for slicer blade or accessories.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The **RUSSELL HOBBS RHPK1002** standalone food processor is a relatively cheap and lightweight model, but it scored significantly lower in the performance tests than the other food processors. It was particularly poor at kneading shortcrust pastry and mixing cake mix.

The **SUNBEAM MultiProcessor Plus LC 6900** and the **MOULINEX Odacio 3 Duo DFC843** combo models have excellent performance scores but are comparatively more difficult to use and clean.

The **MOULINEX Odacio 2 Duo DFC243** and the **KENWOOD Multi Pro FP693** combo models performed very well but are let down by lower ease of use scores. They're also the noisiest models tested.

The **KAMBROOK KFP90**'s blending jug has a wide base and its blades are positioned higher than in other models, which means the food gets spread over the bottom of the jug and achieves less contact with the blade. This is particularly a problem when trying to crush ice and make mayonnaise. It's relatively easy to use, but you can't put its accessories in a dishwasher.

For people with a disability

Only processor-only models were recommended by an occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW):

The **MAGIMIX** and the **BREVILLE Wizz Professional** are recommended for people with a cognitive impairment because of their simple controls and fewer accessories.

The **MAGIMIX, BREVILLE Wizz Professional** and **SUNBEAM Café Series** are the best in the test for people with visual impairment. Their disc-shaped grating/slicing blades are easier to handle without touching the blade itself.

The **MAGIMIX** (below) is recommended for people with pain or weakness in their hands. It has large controls and the blades are less fiddly to assemble than on some other models.

Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	PERFORMANCE: 1 Overall score (%)	2 Performance score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	4 Ease of cleaning score (%)	Max. noise (dB)*	WHAT IT CAN DO: Slice	Shred	Chop	Mix	Knead	Blend / purée	Emuls
Standalone food processor												
MAGIMIX 3100	90	99	80	80	66	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
BREVILLE Wizz Professional BFP600	85	97	75	70	68	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
KENWOOD FP940	84	96	75	70	70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
SUNBEAM Café Series Food Processor LC8900	83	93	75	70	74	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RUSSELL HOBBS RHPK1002	63	56	70	70	84	✓	✓	✓	(A)	(A)	✓	
Combination food processor / blender												
BRAUN CombiMax K750	82	97	75	60	76	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
BREVILLE Super Wizz Duo FP30	81	91	70	70	83	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
SUNBEAM MultiProcessor Plus LC6900	78	95	60	60	80	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
MOULINEX Odacio 3 Duo DFC843	76	90	65	60	77	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
MOULINEX Odacio 2 Duo DFC243	75	88	65	60	85	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
KENWOOD Multi Pro FP693	73	80	60	70	86	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
KAMBROOK KFP90	71	72	70	70	82	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	(A)

* *Measured 0.5 m away from the appliance.*

** *This is the storage height — it includes accessories stacked inside, and the blender where relevant.*

† *Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturer in August 2006.*

(A) *Poor results in the test — not recommended.*

(B) *Wash program only — drying not recommended.*

(C) *Except the whisk drive.*

(D) *Food processor bowl only, no blender jug.*

(E) *Includes accessories in a drawer.*

(F) *Includes blender jug.*

(G) *12 years on the motor.*

(H) *Five years on the motor.*

(I) *10 years on the motor.*

1 Overall score

This is made up of:

- Performance: 50%
- Ease of use: 25%
- Ease of cleaning: 25%

2 Performance score

We assessed how well the food processor slices carrots and celery, chops carrots, raw chicken and onions, mixes cake mix, shreds cheese and carrot and kneads shortcrust pastry. If the instructions

What to look for

An internal storage drawer or separate storage box keeps all the attachments and blades together — a good way to protect the blades and your safety.

A mini-processor bowl that sits inside the main food processor bowl is great for processing small quantities, making pesto and mayonnaise and grinding nuts. The **KENWOOD Multi Pro** is the only model tested with a separate grinder unit.

A double feed chute allows for smaller or thinner foods to be guided into the food processor to give better control when slicing or shredding. The **BREVILLE Super Wizz Duo, KAMBROOK, KENWOOD Multi Pro** and **KENWOOD FP940** have one.

The combination food processor/blenders all have multiple speeds. The standalone food processors only have one speed, except the **RUSSELL HOBBS**, which has two. Our home economist didn't find variable speed a particularly useful feature.

A reversible blade has a grating blade on one side and a slicing blade on the other — it's useful as it cuts down the number of separate blades you need to store. Both the **KENWOODS**, the **MAGIMIX** and the **SUNBEAM Multi Processor Plus** have reversible blades.

A number of models tested come with a citrus juicer (see the table). Only the **MOULINEX Odacio 3 Duo** also has a press juice extractor for juicing other types of fruit and vegetables.

HI-TECH ASSISTANCE

The **MOULINEX Odacio 3 Duo DFC843** is the only model in the test with an LCD screen. It displays over 50 recipes, complete with ingredients list, method, and which accessory and speed to use. It also has an automatic function that allows you to nominate the attachment you're using and it works out itself which speed to use. The information can be displayed in five different languages and it's easy to use.

However, this is by far the most expensive combination food processor/blender in the test ($400) and we aren't convinced it's worth it. The other **MOULINEX** model (the **Odacio 2 Duo DFC243**), which scored only one point lower overall, is only half the price.

		ACCESSORIES				SPECIFICATIONS							
Grind	Crush ice	Citrus juicer	Mini processor	Beater / whisk	Chipping blade	Dishwasher-safe	Claimed capacity, bowl / jug (L)	Weight (kg)	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)**	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)†
✓	✓		✓	✓		✓ **(B)**	2.6 **(D)**, 0.7 mini-bowl	6.3	36 x 24 x 19	3 **(G)**	France	Cambur	499
	✓				✓	✓	1 **(D)**	6.9	42 x 20 x 29	1 **(H)**	China	HWI Electrical	270
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ **(C)**	1.5 **(D)**, 0.3 mini-bowl	7.7	45 x 26 x 23	1 **(H)**	China	DeLonghi	399
						✓	2 **(D)**	9.0 **(E)**	45 x 22 x 30	1 **(J)**	China	Sunbeam	369
						✓	1.5 **(D)**	3.2	33 x 31 x 20	2	China	Salton	129
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓ **(C)**	2 / 0.75	3.7 **(F)**	35 x 35 x 25	1	Germany	Proctor & Gamble	180
✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	1.5 / 1.5	4.3 **(F)**	46 x 44 x 19	1	Turkey	HWI Electrical	180
✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	1.75 / 1.5	4.4 **(F)**	46x 35 x 23	1	China	Sunbeam	179
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓ **(C)**	1.5 / 1.5	4.6 **(F)**	46 x 41 x 19	1	France	Groube SEB	400
✓	✓					✓	1.5 / 1.5	4.4 **(F)**	46 x 41 x 19	1	France	Groube SEB	200
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓ **(C)**	1.5 / 1.5	2.7 **(F)**	41 x 28 x 24	1	China	DeLonghi	249
✓	✓				✓		1.5 / 1.5	4.3 **(F)**	43 x 40 x 18	1	China	Kambrook	110

said the processor-only models could perform other functions, we tested and rated them too, but didn't take any points off models that couldn't. The scores were averaged. For the combination food processor/blenders we also assessed how well the blender makes mayonnaise (emulsifies liquids), grinds nuts, purées soup and crushes ice.

3 Ease of use score
We assessed how easy it is to use the controls by considering their type and position and how easy and comfortable they are to grip. We also checked the clarity of the labels.

4 Ease of cleaning score
We assessed how easy it is to clean the appliance and disassemble and clean the parts.

How much sugar?

Iced tea isn't as healthy as it's sometimes cracked up to be.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **There's good evidence** *that tea can be good for your health, but a bottle of iced tea is just another soft drink.*
- **Most brands of iced tea** *contain a lot of sugar — as much as 11 teaspoons in a 500 mL bottle — and they're likely to have much lower levels of antioxidants than a traditional cup of tea.*

There's now good evidence that drinking tea can be good for your health. Tea contains a variety of antioxidants (mainly flavonoids), as well as a few other healthy micronutrients. So black and green tea alike can help prevent heart disease and may lower your risk of getting some forms of cancer and boost your immune system (though the evidence for this isn't as strong).

So when you're grabbing a quick healthy lunch at the sandwich bar, a bottle of iced tea from the cold drinks cabinet just adds to the good stuff you're eating, right? Wrong.

REALITY CHECK

The manufacturers would certainly like you to think you get the same health benefits from iced tea:

- "Tea contains many good things." (**LIPTON Ice Tea**)
- "100% authentic real brewed with antioxidant catechins." (**POKKA Green Tea**)

But in general, whether it's black or green, ready-made tea contains much lower levels of flavonoids than freshly brewed tea. And most brands of iced tea aren't even made from brewed tea but from 'tea extract' and are likely to have even lower levels of flavonoids.

Though not many brands tell you the amount of antioxidants they contain, **LIPTON Ice Tea Green** (made from tea extract) says on the label that it contains 170 mg of flavonoids per 500 mL bottle — much less than the amount you'd get from the same quantity of freshly brewed green tea (about 700 mg). And **POKKA Green Tea Sweet Jasmine** says it contains 125 mg of catechins (a class of flavonoids) per 500 mL bottle. Even though it's made from brewed tea, this is only about 20% of the amount of catechins in the same quantity of freshly brewed green tea.

So whether it's made from brewed tea or tea extract, iced tea is unlikely to contain enough tea flavonoids to give you the same health benefits as freshly brewed tea. But most brands do contain plenty of sugar.

HOW SWEET IT IS

In its homeland, the US, you can get iced tea that's not sweetened, but not here (unless you make your own). All the brands in our test were heavily sweetened with either sugar or artificial sweeteners.

This is bad news if you're concerned about putting on weight. Experts now think drinks don't make you feel as full as solid foods, so you can take in a lot of sugar (and the kilojoules that go with it) and still feel hungry. And evidence is emerging that even sweet

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

drinks without sugar can give you more of a liking for sweet foods and so indirectly contribute to putting on weight.

You might stir a teaspoon of sugar into a cup of tea without being too concerned about it, but a 500 mL bottle of **SOSRO Fruit Tea** has 11 teaspoons of sugar and a bottle of the top-selling **LIPTON Ice Tea** has seven. About the only positive thing you can say about iced tea and sugar is that most brands contain less than an equivalent-sized bottle of regular **COKE** (included in the table for comparison). But if you need to grab a drink when you're out, bottled water is still the healthiest (and usually cheapest) option. ■

HOW MUCH TEA?

How much tea do you need to drink to get its health benefits? Studies suggest it's at least three cups a day for a significant reduction in your risk of heart disease, and as many as five or six cups a day to improve your body's resistance to infections. Other studies suggest that if tea helps prevent cancer you'd need to drink at least four cups a day. Adding milk to your tea doesn't seem to interfere with its antioxidant activity.

Iced tea (in order of kJ content)	**1 Energy** (kJ)	**1 Sugar** (teaspoons)	**2 Made from brewed tea**	**Size of bottle** (mL)	**Price paid** ($)*
LIPTON Ice Tea Light Lemon Flavour	14	0 **(A)**		500	1.86
LIPTON Ice Tea Light Peach Flavour	15	0 **(B)**		500	1.86
LIPTON Diet Peach Flavour	20	0 **(B)**		500	1.86
SPRING VALLEY Rooibos Tea with a Hint of Lemon Juice	368	4		375	2.60
ESPRIT Peach Flavour	393	4.5		300	3.20
SPRING VALLEY Green Tea with a Hint of Pear & Peach Juice	401	4.5		375	3.00
ESPRIT Lemon Flavour	474	5.5		300	3.20
ESPRIT Strawberry Flavour	474	5.5		300	3.20
SPRING VALLEY Black Tea with a Hint of Lemon Juice	477	5		375	3.00
POKKA Green Tea Sweet Jasmine	504	6	✓	500	2.29
LIPTON Ice Tea Lemon Flavour	583	6.5		500	1.86
LIPTON Ice Tea Green	590	7		500	1.86
LIPTON Ice Tea Peach Flavour	601	7		500	1.86
NESTEA Ice Tea Lemon Flavour	690	8		500	2.85
NESTEA Ice Tea Green Lemon Flavour	704	8		500	2.85
SANTA VITTORIA with Lemon	726	8.5	✓	500	3.00
SANTA VITTORIA with Peach	726	8.5	✓	500	3.00
TETLEY Ice-T Peach & Orange Flavour	748	8.5		500	1.78
TETLEY Ice-T Raspberry & Cranberry Flavour	748	8.5		500	1.78
TETLEY Ice-T Lemon & Lime Flavour	757	9		500	1.78
YEO'S Justea Lemon Flavoured	815	9		500	2.85
POKKA Green Tea Honey Lemon	840	10	✓	500	2.29
POKKA Green Tea Peach	884	10.5	✓	500	2.29
COCA-COLA (for comparison)	900	10.5		500	1.67
SOSRO Fruit Tea Blast Apple-Pear	924	11		500	1.18
SOSRO Fruit Tea Fusion Strawberry-Grape	924	11		500	1.18
SOSRO Fruit Tea X-treme Apple-Blackcurrant	924	11		500	1.18

* *The price we paid in June/July 2006.*

(A) *Contains the artificial sweeteners acesulphame potassium, aspartame and cyclamate.*

(B) *Contains the artificial sweeteners acesulphame potassium and aspartame.*

A bottle of Sosro Fruit Tea has 11 teaspoons of sugar, which kicks in with a flab-forming 924 kilojoules.

1 Kilojoules (energy) and sugar
These are taken from the information on the label (one teaspoon of sugar weighs 5 g and we've rounded the amount to the nearest half teaspoon). Some manufacturers claim a bottle contains 1.5 or two serves, but we think you're more likely to drink the whole bottle.

2 Made from brewed tea
Brewed tea is likely to contain higher levels of antioxidants than the iced teas made from tea extract, but still not as much as freshly brewed tea.

I'll have some latex with mine

A study published recently found that people allergic to latex might have cause for concern from a surprising source — their food. The study found that latex, a type of rubber, can be transferred from food handlers wearing latex gloves in a manufacturing or food preparation setting, to the actual food. Latex is also used as an adhesive in food wrappers, and some cases of allergic reaction have been reported when the wrapper has come into contact with the mouth of a person allergic or sensitive to it.

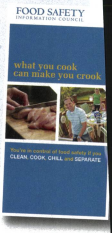
While more research needs to be done, it's possible that labelling laws may need to be modified so that if latex has been used in the manufacture or preparation of food, it will have to be stated on the label.

FOOD SAFETY WEEK

It's on again from 13–18 November, and the theme this year is educating young people who are leaving home for the first time about food safety issues. Research by the Food Safety Information Council has found that young people have poor knowledge of basic food safety issues, such as hand washing and temperature control of food.

The council has released a brochure outlining the importance of keeping hot food above 60°C and cold food below 5°C, and minimising the time that food is kept at a temperature in between, as well as other important information young people may not have thought about before.

If you know a young person about to fend for themselves for the first time, go to www.foodsafety.asn.au and download a brochure for them — they might be very grateful to be saved from a bout of food poisoning.



A lolly a day keeps the doctor away?

We know how much manufacturers like to latch on to the latest health or nutrition information in a bid to promote their products. The latest example of this tendency is the result of the recommendation to eat two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables a day. It's becoming common for products either to claim they contain so many serves of fruit, and in some cases vegetables, as a way of including them in your daily diet, or to promote the mere presence of fruit and veg in their product.

What most of them don't promote is the extras you'll also be getting, often sugar, and the benefits you're likely to be missing out on, such as fibre and valuable vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

An example is **CHUPA CHUPS**, boldly promoting the presence of fruit pulp, "freshness and fruit", and "a new real fruity taste". What's not highlighted is the fact that they're 81% sugar, and the first two ingredients listed are sugar and glucose syrup — there's just 3% fruit pulp.

KATJES Fred Ferkel Confectionery boasts the presence of "real fruit juice" and "natural fruit pulp" yet, again, its major ingredients are glucose syrup and sugar, and it only contains 3% fruit juice.

If you're not eating enough lollies to get your serves of fruit per day, you can always rely on fruit and veg in a sachet to come to your rescue. **Q DAILY** has varieties including **5 fruits.plus, Med.Salade** and **5 vegetables.plus**, that you can sprinkle in your food or drink so that you don't have to go to the trouble of biting into that juicy peach or corncob.

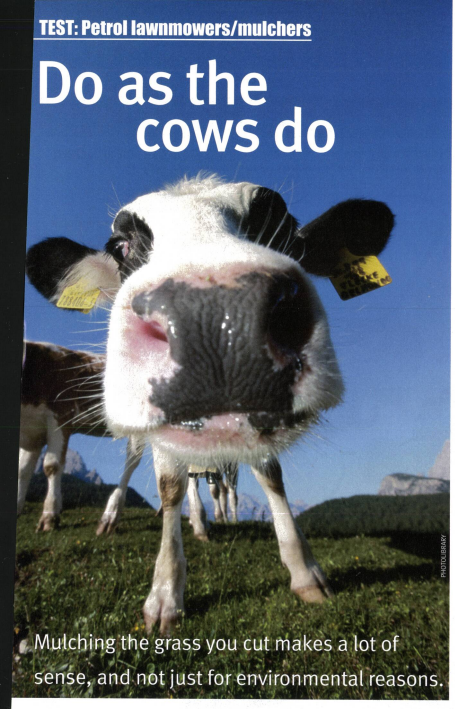
The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) recently investigated claims made by **UNCLE TOBYS** on its **Roll-Ups** products that they were 65% real fruit, in conjunction with an ad showing an apple being flattened into a **Roll-Up**. The ACCC was concerned that the composition of **Roll-Ups** was being misrepresented. As a result of the investigation, **UNCLE TOBYS** has agreed to stop making representations about the product being 65% real fruit, or made by converting fruit into a **Roll-Up** with minimal processing.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

That's not to say you need to stick to the fruit and veg section of your supermarket to get your required serves. Some processed products can be a legitimate source of fruit or vegetables, such as packaged soup, but you need to check the ingredients list to see exactly what else is in there — the fewer additions the better.

Our verdict: stick to the real thing most of the time, and don't rely on processed foods to meet your daily requirements.

Do as the cows do



PHOTOLIBRARY

Mulching the grass you cut makes a lot of sense, and not just for environmental reasons.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **One of the cheaper** *mowers impressed on all fronts — see* What to buy, *page 34.*
- **Four-stroke motors are** *much less polluting than two-strokes, but there's little discernible difference in performance.*

If you want your lawn to look as green and lush as a cow paddock, you've got to do what the cows do — return the nutrients back into the lawn. But with a good mulching mower, you don't need to eat the grass.

A lawnmower with a mulching plug or adapter is designed to chop the grass finely and blow it back down, forcing the clippings into the lawn. The advantages of mulching while you mow are plentiful.

It'll reduce your lawn's need for water and fertiliser, as the mulch slows evaporation and returns the nutrients from the decomposing grass back into the earth. You'll also need less time for mowing, as you no longer have to empty the catcher constantly or (with the best models) rake up unsightly strips of chopped-up grass left on the ground.

On the downside, a mulching mower is less suitable for long grass, so don't let your lawn grow to more than around 25 mm above the desired length. If it's longer, mow in steps and reduce the cutting height between cuts. Or use a catcher for long grass.

MULCHING OR CATCHING?

Many mulching mowers can also be used with a catcher. With most, you simply pull out a mulching plug or adapter from the back of the mower and fit a catcher. All the 12 mowers tested are of the mulch-or-catch type, and they're all pretty easy to convert from one mode to the other.

When you use a mower in catcher mode, the lawn should look perfectly clean afterwards, with no visible grass clippings left on the ground. None of the mowers tested had any problems in this mode when cutting short grass, but with medium and long grass, some slight differences started to show. The more grass clippings a mower left behind, the lower its cutting score.

In mulching mode, most mowers tested received excellent scores for cutting grass. The five listed at the bottom of the table scored a little lower for the grass's appearance after mulching, with the last two leaving a narrow row of clippings behind on short grass and a thick row on medium-length grass.

FOUR-STROKE OR TWO?

Four-strokes are the most common and popular choice in petrol mowers. They run on standard unleaded petrol and have an oil sump that should be checked and changed regularly, just like the oil in a car engine.

Two-stroke mowers burn a mixture of petrol and oil rather than straight petrol and thus generate more air pollution. Their motors are much simpler and very reliable and they're often preferred for mowing steep slopes because they don't have an oil sump where the oil can drain to one end and stop lubricating the engine. However, four-strokes can generally cope with slopes of at least 15°, according to manufacturers.

As for cutting performance, the two types of engine made little, if any, discernible difference in our tests. We included two **VICTA** two-stroke and two four-stroke mowers, to see how the two types of engine compared for cutting and mulching performance — the differences were minimal.

The biggest difference between four- and two-stroke mowers is their environmental impact. Four-strokes are much less polluting, typically emitting half the carbon monoxide and one-tenth the hydrocarbons.

What to buy

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

The **VICTA Tornado TMS484A** topped the table with excellent cutting scores in both catcher and mulching modes and good ease of use. But most of the mowers tested performed very well overall and had no problems cutting grass of short and medium length. Even with long grass most coped very well, so you'd probably be happy with any of the top 10. The four in the *What to buy* list have excellent cutting scores and are a little easier to use than the rest.

VICTA TORNADO MULCH OR CATCH TMS484A

Price: $549 BEST BUY

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance in both catcher and mulching modes.
- Second best for ease of use.
- One of the cheapest mowers in this test.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing in particular.

HONDA BUFFALO BUCK MULCH AND CATCH HRU 19D1

Price: $736

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance in both catcher and mulching modes.
- Large-capacity catcher.

BAD POINTS

- Cutting height adjustment is a little difficult to operate.

ROVER MULCH 'N CATCH 35M92

Price: $609

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance as a mulcher mower.
- The easiest in the test to use.
- Adjustable handle height.
- Cutting height is easier to adjust than on others.

BAD POINTS

- Leaves some grass on the ground when cutting medium-length grass with the catcher fitted.
- Catcher capacity is smaller than on some others.

VICTA MUSTANG MCA485A

Price: $739

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance in both catcher and mulching modes.
- One of the quietest mowers in the test.

BAD POINTS

- The controls are a bit stiff and clunky.

	PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS		
Brand / model (in rank order)	**1 Overall score** (%)	**2 Cutting score** (with catcher, %)	**2 Cutting score** (mulching, %)	**3 Ease of use score** (%)	**4 Noise at 7.5 m / user's position** (dB)	**5 Motor type**	**Starter toggle**	**6 Cutting positions**
VICTA Tornado Mulch or Catch TMS484A	89	98	100	73	70 / 86	4-stroke	On engine	10
HONDA Buffalo Buck Mulch and Catch HRU 19D1	87	98	100	69	69 / 84	4-stroke	Halfway up handle	11
ROVER Mulch 'N Catch 35M92	87	91	100	74	71 / 85	4-stroke	On engine	12
VICTA Mustang MCA485A	87	96	100	70	68 / 83	4-stroke	On engine	10
HONDA Buffalo Classic Mulch and Catch HRU 196D	85	98	100	64	72 / 84	4-stroke	Halfway up handle	11
VICTA Mustang MCA482A	85	96	100	66	72 / 87	2-stroke	On engine	10
YARD-MAN 404X 18" Mulch & Catch	85	99	100	63	72 / 89	4-stroke	Halfway up handle	9
VICTA Tornado Mulch or Catch TMS482A **(A)**	84	98	90	69	69 / 85	2-stroke	On engine	10
ROVER Leader 32H160	83	91	95	68	70 / 86	4-stroke	On engine	9
MASPORT Chip Catch n Mulch 983843	81	98	85	66	69 / 84	4-stroke	Halfway up handle	10
GMC Mulch & Catch TDL484 **(B)**	79	98	80	64	66 / 83	4-stroke	Halfway up handle	5
TALON Eagle Ultimate Mulch or Catch AM3065	71	81	73	63	68 / 83	4-stroke	On engine	12

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **HONDA Buffalo Classic** has a large catcher, but is more difficult to use: it's heavy, noisy and its controls are stiff.
- On both remaining **VICTAs** tested the cutting height is difficult to adjust, as the lever hits the wheel. The **VICTA Tornado Mulch or Catch TMS482A** left some grass on the ground when mulching, and the **VICTA Mustang MCA482A** was one of the noisiest in the test.
- The **YARD-MAN** is also noisy, the catcher is difficult to fit and take off, and when carrying the mower, the handle cuts into your hand.
- The **ROVER Leader** vibrated a lot in our tests. Its handle is adjustable, but the catcher is comparatively small.
- The **MASPORT Chip Catch n Mulch** has a chipper attachment that works well for mulching a few small, green branches.
- The **GMC Mulch & Catch** has a 'deadman's handle' — see the photo and caption, below, for pros and cons of this feature. It has good controls, but the catcher is a little flimsy and fiddly to attach.
- Scoring lowest for cutting (in both modes) and ease of use, the **TALON Eagle Ultimate** was the only mower tested whose engine slowed when cutting medium-length grass. Its controls are vague and flimsy and although it has an adjustable, very comfortable handle, its weight and bulk make it tiring to push.

GERIE BYRNES

As soon as you let go of the GMC's deadman's handle, the motor stops. While a good safety feature, it's annoying to have to keep restarting the engine, and it's uncomfortable to hold the handle all the time.

What to look for

- The **handle** should be adjustable, turned up and comfortable to hold.
- The **engine control lever** should be on the handlebar for easy access.
- The **starter toggle** is usually on the engine or halfway up the handle. Check in the shop which suits you best.
- The **cutting height** should be easy to adjust, with one lever action, to many different **cutting positions**.
- The **catcher** should be made of rigid plastic; with a bag-type catcher you can get showered in dust. It should have two handles: one for carrying and one for emptying.
- The **mulching adapter or plug** (if the mower has one) should be easy to fit and remove.
- **Big wheels** improve handling on rough ground.
- With a **wash port or nozzle** on top of the housing, cleaning the underside of the mower should be easier.
- For **maintenance**, spark plugs, oil and air filters should be easy to access.

Cutting ght ge (mm)	Width of cut (measured, mm)	Weight (kg)*	Warranty (years, general / motor)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)**
5	480	26	2 / 2	Australia	Victa	549
	470	28	4 / 4 **(C)**	Australia	Honda	736
	450	28	1 / 2	Australia	Rover	609
	480	26	2 / 2	Australia	Victa	739
	470	33	4 / 4 **(C)**	Australia	Honda	886
	480	27	2 / 3	Australia	Victa	699
	460	28	2 / 2	NZ	MTD	599
	480	28	2 / 3	Australia	Victa	549
	450	28	1 / 2	Australia	Rover	649
	460	28	2 / 2	NZ	Masport	599
	450	26	2 / 2	Italy	GMC	449
		35	2 / 2	China	Talon	499

* *Mower only, not including catcher or mulching plug.*

** *Prices are recommended or average retail, as provided by manufacturers in September 2006.*

(A) *Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops; replacement TMS482B has a new motor.*

(B) *Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops; replacement model isn't a mulcher.*

(C) *Domestic use; must be serviced according to service schedule.*

1 Overall score

This is a combination of the cutting (in both modes) and ease of use scores, weighted as follows:

- Cutting: 60%
- Ease of use: 40%

2 Cutting score

We assessed the mowers' performance with catcher and in mulching mode, to check if they can cut grass of various lengths without the motor slowing. Both scores include an assessment of the appearance of the lawn after mowing short and medium-length grass. Cutting performance and appearance aspects are weighted equally.

3 Ease of use score

The following equally weighted assessments contributed to this score:

- Vibration.
- Pushing/manoeuvring.
- Controls.
- Cutting height adjustment.
- Starting.
- Catcher convenience.
- Handle comfort.
- Converting from catcher to mulcher.

4 Noise

We measured the noise of the mowers in catcher mode; they're generally a little quieter in mulching mode. Measurements were taken from the user's position and at 7.5 m from the mower. Although they're all loud, the difference between the quietest and the loudest is noticeable.

5 Motor type

See *Four-stroke or two?*, page 33, for more on this.

6 Cutting positions/cutting height range

You can vary the length you cut the grass to by adjusting the height of the blade above the ground. These columns show the number of positions available and the range of approximate lengths you can cut the grass to, based on our measurements of the distance between the blade and the bottom of the wheels. A mower with a comparatively low maximum cutting height will probably have more trouble cutting a very overgrown lawn.

GENE ROSS

They're cheaper to buy than run.

Inkjet printers

ON TEST

(in rank order)

- Canon Pixma IP5200R
- Canon Pixma IP5200
- Canon Pixma IP4200
- Canon Pixma IP6600D
- Epson Stylus Photo R350
- Epson Stylus Photo R250
- Canon Pixma IP6220D
- Epson Stylus C87
- Epson Stylus Photo R230
- Canon Pixma IP2200
- Canon Pixma IP1600
- Canon Pixma IP6210D
- HP Deskjet 5440 Photo Printer
- Epson Stylus C67
- HP Deskjet 3940
- Lexmark Z735

The most expensive thing about owning an inkjet printer is the running cost, and the latest batch of printers tested by CHOICE Computer magazine is no exception. But if you put the cost of their use aside, some are capable of producing very good results very quickly.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Duplex printing lets you print on both sides of the paper, which is handy for long documents and helps reduce paper use as well as costs.
- Pictbridge lets digital cameras and inkjet printers talk to each other without needing a computer. Most newer cameras have it, but not all printers. We found printing in this mode tends to give noticeably lower-quality results than going through a computer.
- All the products in this test can print envelopes and even transfers, which may come in handy for temporary skin tattoos or customised T-shirts. Some can also print banners, borderless photos and CD or DVD labels.
- Separate colour cartridges let you replace just the colours that are running out, which can save you some money.
- The printhead is the part that applies ink to a page. It can be permanently attached to the printer, removable so it can be replaced if it's damaged or worn out, or integrated into the cartridge. The advantage of the latter is that it's replaced each time the cartridge runs out, so it's unlikely to suffer blockages or wear out, but often this increases the cost.

PERFORMANCE VS COST

The overall scores of the two **CANON** printers in the *What to buy* list are well above the rest, but if you're concerned about how much these products cost to run, consider the **EPSON Stylus C87** also in the list. It's the cheapest in the test to run and could end up saving you hundreds of dollars.

You can connect the **CANON Pixma IP5200R** to more than one computer, either via normal network cables or using a Wi-Fi wirelesss connection.

CHOICE Computer magazine, September/October 2006, has full test results and product specs, including scores for print quality, speed and ink costs as well as tips for saving ink. If you'd like to subscribe go to www.choice.com.au/magazines or call 1800 069 552 toll-free.

WHAT TO BUY

CANON Pixma IP5200 $249
CANON Pixma IP5200R $349

EPSON Stylus C87 $149

Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in July 2006.

The major difference between the two **CANON** models is that the **IP5200R** has Wi-Fi wireless connectivity, which could be a real bonus if you need to use it away from your computer. Otherwise they're very similar machines and provide little compromise on quality, speed and running costs.

The **EPSON C87** is only an OK performer but it's the cheapest of the models in terms of usage. If you value running costs above all else, it's a good choice.

Best-value vacs

Not too cheap, not too dear... for best-value cleaning performance, mid-price vacuum cleaners are just right.

If you're willing to spend a bit for a good vacuum cleaner but don't want to pay more than you have to, our latest test shows there are several good performers available for a few hundred dollars.

Generally, the vacs in this test remove dirt from carpet better than cheap models (CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2006) and clean just as well as more expensive ones (CHOICE, July 2005). And on average they're a bit easier to use too. We found similar results last time we looked at mid-priced vacs (CHOICE, August 2004).

The conclusion is clear: mid-priced vacs give the best value for money. Spending more on more expensive models that are widely advertised or cleverly marketed is a waste.

TURBO AND POWER HEADS

Turbo and power heads are designed to enhance cleaning performance, particularly on carpet, and are often found as extras (optional or supplied), particularly on more expensive models. A turbo head has a rotating brush driven by the air flowing through it; it's not the same as a power head, which has an inbuilt motor to drive the brush. Generally, a power head makes a much bigger difference to cleaning performance than a turbo head.

In this test, the **KAMBROOK** and **HOOVER** are supplied with a power head, and the **LG** comes with a turbo head. All performed better on carpet with these heads than with their standard head (see the table, page 40). However, turbo and power heads can be bulky and you might not want to use them all the time. We've given results with the standard and power/turbo heads, as the extra performance might influence your choice.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

WHAT TO BUY

WERTHEIM 2000	$499
MIELE S5210	$399
ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer Deluxe Z3357	$449
NILFISK Extreme X100	$449

If you're happy to push a power head around all the time (see left), the first two models below scored highest for dirt removal on carpet when using the one that was supplied with them, and the **LG** with its turbo head removed about as much dirt as the **ELECTROLUX** and **NILFISK** above:

KAMBROOK Jaguar Soarer KVC23	$280
HOOVER Hygiene with HEPA VC358	$449
LG Cyking V-CC162HTU	$329

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 12 barrel vacuum cleaners** *priced between $250 and $500.*
- **Generally, vacs** *in this price range clean better than cheaper models and are as good as more expensive ones.*

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

WERTHEIM 2000

Price: $499

GOOD POINTS

- Best in the test for dirt removal on carpet with a standard cleaning head.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Variable power.
- Telescopic wand.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Fairly lightweight.
- Dustbag is easy to install and remove.

BAD POINTS

- Not particularly good at cleaning corners and edges.
- High-pitched sound can be annoying.

MIELE S5210

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Good dirt removal on carpet.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Variable power.
- Telescopic wand.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Fairly lightweight.
- Dustbag is easy to install and remove.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing in particular.

ELECTROLUX ULTRA SILENCER DELUXE Z3357

Price: $449

GOOD POINTS

- Good dirt removal on carpet.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor, using the hard-floor tool.
- Good range of tools, though no onboard storage for the crevice tool.
- The quietest in the test.
- Variable power.
- Telescopic wand.
- HEPA filter (see *What to look for*, page 40).
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Fairly lightweight.
- Dustbag is easy to install and remove.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing in particular.

NILFISK EXTREME X100

Price: $449

GOOD POINTS

- Good dirt removal on carpet.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.

BAD POINTS

- Heavy.
- Compared to the other tested models, its dustbag isn't convenient to remove and its power switch isn't easy to use.

KAMBROOK JAGUAR SOARER KVC23

Price: $280

GOOD POINTS

- Very good dirt removal on carpet when using the supplied power head.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Variable power.
- Telescopic wand.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Fairly lightweight.
- Dustbag is easy to install and remove.

BAD POINTS

- The noisiest model in the test and its high-pitched sound can be very annoying.

HOOVER HYGIENE WITH HEPA VC358

Price: $449

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent dirt removal on carpet when using the supplied power head.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- The standard cleaning head moves very easily over carpet.
- One of the better models at cleaning corners and edges.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Variable power.
- Telescopic wand.
- HEPA filter.
- Very good reach from the power point.

BAD POINTS

- Fairly heavy.

LG CYKING V-CC162HTU

Price: $329

GOOD POINTS

- Good dirt removal on carpet when using the supplied turbo head.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- The standard cleaning head moves very easily over carpet.
- Good range of tools, but no onboard storage.
- Variable power.
- Power controls conveniently located on its telescopic wand.
- HEPA filter.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Fairly lightweight.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing in particular.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **BOSCH, PANASONIC** and **SAMSUNG** are also worth considering, especially if you find them at a good price, though none of them picks up dirt from carpet as well as the recommended models, so they might be better suited to homes with hard floors. (The manufacturer of the **BOSCH** told us the same model now comes with an upgraded cleaning head, which it claims should improve its cleaning performance.)
- The **AIRFLO** is the worst performer on carpet. It also has the shortest power cord.
- The **HITACHI** isn't particularly good at cleaning corners and edges, its cleaning head is tiring to move over carpet, and its filter is difficult to remove and replace. Also, a small amount of our test sand escaped the **HITACHI**'s dustbin and ended up inside the housing. This could be due to a poor seal between the filter and the body, and could eventually lead to dirt getting into the motor.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

We assessed how suitable the vacuum cleaners are for someone with a disability, using guidelines from the Independent Living Centre (NSW).

The **MIELE** and **SAMSUNG** would be the best choices. They're very easy to use, their cleaning heads move easily over carpet and their controls are easy to operate. However, each has some drawbacks:

- The **MIELE** has controls labelled with black-on-grey writing, which some people could find hard to read.
- The **SAMSUNG** has no onboard storage for its tools.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Dirt removal score (carpet, %)	3 Dirt removal score (hard floor, %)	4 Scratch test score (%)	5 Cleaning corners and edges score (%)	6 Ease of use score (%)	7 Noise (dB)	FEATURES Dust collec
WERTHEIM 2000	87	82	100	100	63	85	70	Paper bag
MIELE S5210	85	75	99	100	76	85	68	Paper bag
ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer Deluxe Z3357	83	73	100 **(E)**	100	75	82	61	Paper bag
NILFISK Extreme X100	82	78	99	100	74	73	63	Paper bag
BOSCH Formula HEPA BSG71830AU **(A)**	82	64	99	100	79	87	65	Paper bag
KAMBROOK Jaguar Soarer KVC23	82 / 90 **(C)**	65 / 87 **(C)**	100	100	73	87	81	Paper bag
PANASONIC MC-5530 **(B)**	81	65	99	100	74	85	69	Paper bag
SAMSUNG Silver Nano SC7063	81	66	99	100	68	83	68	Bin or paper b
HOOVER Hygiene with HEPA VC358	80 / 90 **(C)**	61 / 91 **(C)**	100	100	79	83	71	Paper bag
LG Cyking V-CC162HTU	80 / 84 **(D)**	63 / 74 **(D)**	96	100	74	85	71	Bin
AIRFLO Hurricane AFV9058	76	57	99	100	77	77	72	Bin
HITACHI CV-SH20V Cyclonic Cleaner	75	66	96	100	62	68	73	Bin

What to look for

If you can try out a vacuum cleaner in the shop, go for one that's light, quiet and easy to manoeuvre over both carpet and hard surfaces. A long cord, so you're not forever changing power points, as well as a neat, compact design for easy storage, are other bonuses.

Bin and (in particular) cloth dirt collectors are messier and harder to empty, while paper bags are more user-friendly but have ongoing costs and may be something you occasionally forget to buy.

The following features are also useful — see the table for which models have them, if it's not stated here:

Accessories: All the tested cleaners come with a crevice nozzle and a dusting brush; all except the **HITACHI** come with an upholstery tool.

Variable suction/power: A variable suction control on the wand and/or a variable power control (usually on the body of the cleaner) allows you to lower the suction for more delicate jobs such as cleaning curtains.

HEPA filter: This stands for high-efficiency particulate air filter. It's an international standard for filters that trap minute particles. This type of filter can help if you have asthma or a dust allergy or sensitivity, but you have to clean or replace it regularly (about once a year) to ensure it works efficiently.

Adjustable head height: This feature is usually available on uprights only. It allows you to adjust the height of the bristles on the cleaning head to the length of the carpet pile or for when you're vacuuming hard surfaces. In this test, all the standard vacuum heads are adjustable for carpet or hard floors, and the **LG** turbo head is also height-adjustable for long or short carpet pile.

Telescopic wand: This lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you shouldn't have to bend your back too much. All the tested models have one, and all have a place on the body of the cleaner to attach the wand for storage.

ROBOT VACS

Not so long ago, the 21st century was portrayed as a gleaming era of flying cars, vacations on the moon and domestic robots taking care of the household chores. What happened? Well, our skies might not be filled with flying cars, but you can buy a robot to do your vacuuming... sort of.

We put the **IROBOT ROOMBA** and the **WILD ELECTRONICS** robot cleaners to the test. Both are easy to use, and operate on a bump-and-go principle; they trundle around brushing up dust and when they hit an obstacle, they change direction.

Sadly — just as we found when we tested **THE GENIUS** robot cleaner last year — it seems there's a way to go before machines can be trusted with cleaning the house.

Neither machine was any good at cleaning carpet; they were better on hard floors, but still nowhere near as effective as a standard vac. They each took several minutes to clean less than a square metre of hard floor to a barely acceptable level. You'd clean the same area with a standard vac in only a few seconds, and do a much better job too.

And they're surprisingly noisy for such small machines; both robots were about as noisy as the loudest standard models we tested.

IROBOT ROOMBA DISCOVERY 5250

Price: $400

The **IROBOT ROOMBA** has motorised rotating brushes and a minimal vacuum mechanism to sweep up the dirt. It manages a slow but otherwise reasonable cleaning performance on a hard floor — until its small dirt container begins to fill up, when every time it bumps a wall, some of the collected dirt falls out again. The manufacturer said that if the floor was kept clean by running the **ROOMBA** routinely (every day, for instance) it'd almost never pick up enough dirt for this to happen. They also claim it works best on ordinary household dirt and debris such as hair and lint, rather than the sand used in our standard test.

It's supposed to return to its base for recharging when necessary,

d	Wand suction control	Variable power	Bag-full indicator	HEPA filter	SPECIFICATIONS 8 Max. power (W)	Reach (m)	Weight (kg)	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
	✓	✓	✓		1950	8.8	7.4	2	Italy	Electrical Home Aids	499
	✓	✓	✓		1870	9.8	7.8	2	Germany	Miele	399
	✓	✓	✓	✓	1320	12.0	7.3	2	Hungary	Electrolux	449
	✓		✓	✓	1390	10.4	9.9	5 / 1 **(J)**	Sweden	Nilfisk	449
		✓	✓	✓	1600	10.2	6.8	2	Germany	BSH	429
		✓	✓	✓	1980	11.8	7.9	2	China	HWI Electrical	280
	✓	✓	✓	✓	1830	8.5	7.7	2	Malaysia	Panasonic	289
	✓ **(G)**	✓	✓ **(H)**	✓	1300	9.0	6.9	2 / 3 **(K)**	Korea	Samsung	399
	✓	✓	✓	✓	1760	8.4	8.4	2	China	Electrical Home Aids	449
	✓ **(G)**	✓	✓ **(H)**	✓	1400	8.3	7.6	2	Korea	LG Electronics	329
	✓		✓ **(H)**	✓	1430	7.8	7.1	ns	ns	Airflo	250
	✓	✓	✓ **(H)**	✓	1780	8.0	6.1	2	Thailand	Hitachi	339

* *Recommended retail price, as advised by manufacturers in August 2006, or the price we paid.*

ns *Not stated.*

(A) *New stock comes with an upgraded cleaning head, so if you're buying this model check that's what you're getting.*

(B) *Discontinued but may still be available in some shops. Replacement model MC-CG663 available from October, rrp $279 including turbo head.*

(C) *Second number shows score when using the power head.*

(D) *Second number shows score when using the turbo brush.*

(E) *Using the hard floor tool.*

(F) *For upholstery and dusting tools only.*

(G) *Controlled by the variable power switch on the wand.*

(H) *Bin contents visible.*

(J) *Five years for cleaner, one year for nozzles, filters, hoses, tubes and other accessories.*

(K) *Two years for cleaner, three for motor.*

but failed to do so in our test. It ran for two hours on its longest setting.

While it mightn't be much of a cleaner, the **ROOMBA** does have a feature to interest any hackers and engineers out there: an interface that allows you to reprogram it. Websites exist where people can trade tips on reprogramming this robot.

WILD ELECTRONICS SMART MULTI-FUNCTION RV-9

Price: $199

The **WILD ELECTRONICS** cleaner also has a vacuum action and motorised brushes, and is similarly very poor at cleaning carpet. It fares better on a hard floor, and doesn't suffer from the **ROOMBA**'s problem of dust falling out when it bumps a wall.

It ran for around 43 minutes on its longest setting before needing a recharge — less than the claimed duration of one hour.

MORE ROBOTS

The German consumer magazine, *Test*, tested two more expensive and sophisticated robot cleaners in 2004. These were the **ELECTROLUX Trilobite** and the **KÄRCHER Robocleaner RC3000** (theoretically both available here too, but you'd almost certainly have to order one specially). They navigate by ultrasonic or optical sensors and have loading stations where they empty their onboard bins and/or recharge.

At around $3000 each, you'd hope these would give excellent performance, and according to the German test, they do a good job on hard floors. However, they're still not very good at picking up dust from carpet or along edges and corners.

1 Overall score

This is made up of:

- Dirt removal on carpet: 35%
- Dirt removal on hard floor: 21%
- Scratch test (hard floor): 7%
- Cleaning corners and edges: 7%
- Ease of use: 30%

2–6 Scores

For what we tested and measured to get these scores, see CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2006, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue under 'Vacuum cleaners' in the index.

7 Noise

Measured at the user's position. Some models have a high-pitched whistle that can be irritating, even though they're no louder than others.

8 Measured power

Higher power doesn't guarantee better cleaning performance — there are higher-wattage machines at both ends of our table.

Nanovacs?

Nanotechnology is the manipulation and use of matter at the nano scale — that is, at atomic or molecular levels. Nano-particles are used to make products like self-cleaning windows, long-lasting paints and transparent sunscreens.

They can also help fight bacteria. As its name implies, the **SAMSUNG Silver Nano SC7063** tested contains nano-particles of silver in its filtration system, to kill bacteria and fungi (we didn't test whether it works). This technology is also used in other **SAMSUNG** products, such as fridges and air conditioners.

However, there might be some risks with the widespread use of nano-particles — for example, they might be more easily absorbed into the human body than larger particles of the same substances, with potentially adverse effects. For the same reason, nano-particles might become a new form of environmental pollutant. And there are risks for society too, in the potential military and surveillance applications of nanotech, plus greater corporate power through the patenting of new materials.

The Federal Government has created a Nanotechnology Taskforce to form a national strategy for nanotech; CHOICE would like to see the Taskforce initiate wide public engagement to make sure the potential risks are properly addressed.

KEEPING IT COOL

Fridges have to be more energy-efficient than ever before — but this shouldn't come at the cost of good temperature management.

PHOTOS: GENE BOSS

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 11 new fridges,** *bringing the total we can report on to 42.*
- **We found a few new models** *to recommend, but as in our last fridge test, four of the newly tested fridges can't be recommended because they have large temperature fluctuations.*
- **Six out of 12 models** *made by Electrolux that we've tested over the past two years have had problems.*

It may seem obvious: the first task of fridges is to achieve and maintain temperatures suitable to keep food safe and maintain its quality. But since January 2005 all newly produced fridges in Australia have also been required to conform to more stringent energy efficiency regulations under the Minimum Energy Performance Standard (MEPS 2005).

We're right behind measures that encourage greater energy efficiency, but with the new regulations in place too many newer fridges don't seem to be finding a good enough balance between energy use and temperature performance.

FAMILIAR TRENDS

We tested 11 fridges from seven brands for this update, ranging in size from 256 L to 640 L and priced from $649 to $2199, and found some familiar trends. The smallest fridges (200–299 L) again didn't do a very good job and we'd recommend buying a slightly larger model as long as your kitchen and budget can take it.

Many current fridges have large temperature fluctuations that mean they're not providing the best environment for food storage — four of these newly tested models scored just 25% or less on this front. And few current models have a chiller, so you can't store fresh fish and other highly perishable foods in the most suitable temperature (around 0°C).

TEMPERATURE SEESAWS

Many new MEPS 2005-compliant fridges have longer compressor cycles — the period when the compressor runs and stops, runs and stops. Longer compressor cycling uses less energy and so works in favour of energy efficiency. However, it can also increase temperature fluctuations in the fresh food and freezer compartments, and large fluctuations can compromise the quality of some foods, particularly those whose surfaces are more vulnerable to bacteria. We've found fridges that can meet MEPS requirements and manage temperatures well, but if

energy efficiency comes at the expense of appropriate temperature management, it's false economy.

In this test, the **ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR NB430J** did well at maintaining steady temperatures throughout the stopping and starting of the compressor. By contrast, the **ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR N520J**, **SAMSUNG SR-281NW**, **NEC NTM260R** and **NEC NTM470R** failed our temperature fluctuation test and we can't recommend them.

PROBLEMS WITH ELECTROLUX MODELS

Two Electrolux models in this test — the **SIMPSON SBM4300WA** and **WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso BJ383V** — had problems with temperature management. We had both serviced, and in both cases technicians replaced the duct that carries the cold air up the back of the fridge. In fact, when Electrolux saw our test results for the **SIMPSON** (we give manufacturers the opportunity to comment on them before we publish), it told us it was likely there was a problem with the duct.

The **WESTINGHOUSE** problem was fixed early enough for us to retest, and its results are in the table. With the **SIMPSON** we only had time to do a few check-tests after the repair: enough to see its performance had improved, but not enough to publish full results in the table.

We've encountered duct-related problems with six out of the 12 MEPS 2005-compliant Electrolux fridges we've tested over the last two years, across all three Electrolux brands (**ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR, SIMPSON** and **WESTINGHOUSE**). We understand that many of the MEPS-compliant models in question share a similar duct design.

Symptoms of a duct-related problem aren't clear-cut and may vary from fridge to fridge. You may notice that you can't achieve reasonable temperatures in both compartments using the 'mid' setting; that it's difficult to get a good range of temperatures between fridge and freezer; or that fresh-food cooling time is longer than you'd expect. Or your food just doesn't seem to last as well as it should.

We're wondering just how many Electrolux fridges with this type of problem are out there, with vaguely unsatisfied owners who just can't quite get the fridge working as well as they'd expect. Electrolux confirmed there have been problems with **SIMPSON** ducts and with their fitting, and said it's currently making changes to address these issues.

In the meantime, if you think you have an affected model, you could try Electrolux's suggestion of adjusting the fridge thermostat to a colder setting than mid and the freezer control to a warmer setting than mid. If you still find the fridge's operation unsatisfactory and it's within the two-year warranty period, you can have it serviced free of charge.

EXCESS ENERGY

One of the tested models, the **HITACHI R480ET5X**, used around 18% more energy than its energy label indicated, well above the 10% variation allowed for. If you owned one that behaved this way, you'd pay $150 more for electricity over 10 years than you'd expect from the label.

WHAT TO BUY

This list includes the best fridges in each size range as well as **Best Buys**, which are comparatively cheaper both to buy and run. Where possible we've tried to include both top (T) and bottom (B) freezers.

The products in the table, *What to buy* list and **Best Buys** change from test to test as products are discontinued or prices change, and new products are released.

200–299 L

We keep testing but again none of the tested fridges in this size range scored well enough to be recommended. Manufacturers seem to be putting their attention and best technology into larger models. So you're probably better off buying a slightly larger model, if you can afford it and fit it in your kitchen.

300–375 L

New **FISHER & PAYKEL Elegance E372B** (B)	$1449
FISHER & PAYKEL Tasman E331T (T) ◀ TEST BUY ▶	$1019
SAMSUNG Cool n' Cool SRL316NW (B) ◀ TEST BUY ▶	$899
WESTINGHOUSE RJ362V (T)	$1009

376–450 L

WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso RJ423V (T)	$1589
FISHER & PAYKEL Tasman E381T (T) ◀ TEST BUY ▶	$1179
FISHER & PAYKEL Elegance E440T (T)	$1549
WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso RJ393V (T)	$1429
FISHER & PAYKEL Tasman E442B (B)	$1609

There are other fridges almost as good as these in this price range — see the table, page 46.

451–525 L

WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso RJ525V (T)	$1689
New **FISHER & PAYKEL Elegance E521T** (T)	$1799
ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR NB510J (B)	$1639

MORE THAN 525 L

SAMSUNG Cool Tech Plus SRL550DW (B)	$1999

This is currently the only fridge of this size that we've tested that's still on the market, but it's a good model and remains in the *What to buy* list.

SIDE-BY-SIDE

WESTINGHOUSE WSE6100WA	$1799
New **WHIRLPOOL 6ED2FHKXRL**	$2199

Profiles

Three of the newly tested fridges scored well enough to be recommended. For profiles of the other models in the *What to buy* list, see CHOICE, May 2006, November 2005, May 2005, November 2004, November 2003 (for side-by-side fridges) and May 2003 (for extra-large fridges). You'll also find them in the appropriate month under 'fridges' in the choiceextra.com.au index.

FISHER & PAYKEL ELEGANCE E372B

Price: $1449
373 L, freezer on bottom

GOOD POINTS

- Good fresh food cooling and very good crisper freshness.
- Electronic controls with LED display act relatively independently between compartments, making adjustments simpler.
- Good temperatures in both fridge and freezer on 'mid' setting, and controls allow a good range of temperature combinations between compartments.
- Handles external temperature change very well.
- Quiet relative to other fridges.
- Self-closing mechanisms on both doors.

BAD POINTS

- Moderate temperature fluctuations as the compressor stops and starts.
- No chiller compartment.

FISHER & PAYKEL ELEGANCE E521T

Price: $1799
517 L, freezer on top

GOOD POINTS

- Very energy-efficient.
- Very good fresh food cooling.
- Electronic controls with LED display act relatively independently between compartments, making adjustments simpler.
- Good temperatures in both fridge and freezer on 'mid' setting, and controls allow a good range of temperature combinations between compartments.
- Handles external temperature change well.
- Good temperature uniformity within each compartment.
- Quiet relative to other fridges.
- Self-closing mechanisms on both doors.

BAD POINTS

- No chiller compartment.
- Reduced total fresh-food door storage as there are no shelves below the crisper height.

WHIRLPOOL 6ED2FHKXRL

Price: $2199
640 L, side-by-side

GOOD POINTS

- Very energy-efficient.
- Very good crisper freshness.
- Good temperatures in both fridge and freezer on 'mid' setting, and controls allow a very good range of temperature combinations between compartments.
- Chiller with control (but it can be a little warm for best storage of highly perishable foods like fresh fish unless the freezer setting is particularly cold).
- Self-closing mechanisms on both doors.

BAD POINTS

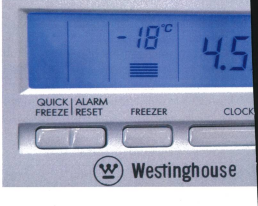
- Takes a lot longer than most other models to cool down fresh food.
- Setting the temperatures tends to be trial and error.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the fridges in our latest test. Of the newly tested models in the *What to Buy* list:

- The **FISHER & PAYKEL ELEGANCE E372B** can be recommended for wheelchair users.
- For people with poor vision or cognitive impairment, the **FISHER & PAYKEL E372B** and **E521T** are recommended.
- For someone with back pain, also the **FISHER & PAYKEL E372B.**

For reports on previously tested models that would suit people with a particular disability, see the previous issues of CHOICE mentioned under *Profiles*, above, or go to choiceextra.com.au and look under 'fridges' in the index.

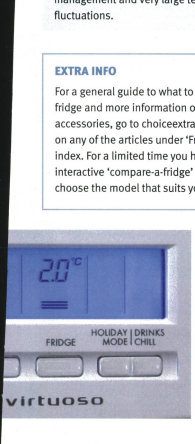


WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE NEW MODELS?

- See *What to buy* (page 43) for comments on the smallest fridges tested.
- The **ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR NB430J** (431 L) works well generally but takes longer than most other models in the table to cool down fresh food.
- The **WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso BJ383V** (381 L) works quite well overall, although the electronic controls are a little inaccurate, and you may have to adjust fridge and freezer temperature settings with seasonal change.
- The **FISHER & PAYKEL E522B** (519 L) performs well generally, but has some temperature variation across its freezer compartment and its door bottle shelf is comparatively warm. You'd probably be happy with it at a competitive price.
- The **HITACHI R480ETSX** (480 L) is generally good, but its door bottle shelf is comparatively warm and it uses significantly more energy than claimed.
- The **ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR N520J** (517 L) is quite fast at cooling down fresh food and also particularly energy-efficient, but is let down by a low temperature performance score (45%), including very large temperature fluctuations.
- The **NEC NTM470R** (470 L) can't be recommended owing to poor basic temperature management and very large temperature fluctuations.

EXTRA INFO

For a general guide to what to look for in a fridge and more information on features and accessories, go to choiceextra.com.au and click on any of the articles under 'Fridges' in the index. For a limited time you have access to our interactive 'compare-a-fridge' tool to help you choose the model that suits you best.



Temperature readouts for both fridge and freezer make adjustments easier.

HOW RELIABLE HAVE SUBSCRIBERS FOUND THEM?

Fridges are comparatively reliable overall. Around 8000 subscribers told us about their fridges (bought in or after 1996) in our last reliability survey, and 10% of them had needed repair in the previous 12 months. But there was a sliding scale here: only 7% of fridges with a volume of less than 300 L had needed repair, while 13% of people owning one of the bigger models (over 500 L) had to call in the repairer.

The graph on the right shows the results for brands for which we received enough replies to report on (at least 100). The numbers in brackets show the number of responses. A difference of 6% or more between brands is meaningful.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR	
All fridges (8262)	90
LG (266)	97
Kelvinator (1006)	93
Whirlpool (445)	93
Samsung (186)	92
Westinghouse (2183)	91
Fisher & Paykel (2831)	89
Amana (120)	86
GE (239)	84
Maytag (181)	80

NOTES FOR THE TABLE, OVERLEAF

1 Overall score
The overall score is based on performance and ease of use, weighted as follows:
- Ease of use: 20%
- Temperature performance: 40%
- Energy efficiency: 20%
- Crisper freshness: 8%
- Fresh food cooling: 12%

Notes 2–8
Go to choiceextra.com.au and click on any of the articles under 'Fridges' in the index to see what we tested and measured for these scores (under *Our test*).

9 Claimed volume
The volume claimed by the manufacturer tells you approximately how much air space the fridge has to cool; less space is available for storage, especially in a frost-free freezer compartment. Use the volume to get an idea of how big the freezer is compared with the fresh-food compartment, so you can choose a fridge that meets your storage needs.

10 10-year running costs
These are calculated at a rate of 15 cents per kWh. A 10-year period provides a useful indication of the long-term differences between high and low energy usage — and you should be able to expect your fridge to last at least that long.

*Newly tested models.*

***** *This is the basic warranty; some manufacturers guarantee some parts for longer. Conditions may apply — check with the retailer.*

****** *Prices are recommended retail, provided by manufacturers in August/September 2006.*

na *Not applicable: the doors are side-by-side.*

Rev *Reversible door.*

(A) *Model discontinued but may still be in some shops.*

(B) *The refrigerant in this fridge has been increased from 105 g to 110 g since we tested it, but the model number hasn't changed. F&P says the change should improve energy consumption and performance. As both versions may be on the market, check the nameplate inside the door of the fresh-food compartment to see how much refrigerant your fridge contains.*

(C) *Most F&P fridges come in four price and style ranges: Tasman, Elegance (which have minor cosmetic differences between them), Inox (brushed stainless steel) and Iridium (fingerprint-resistant stainless steel).*

(D) *New crisper and/or freezer bins have been added since our test.*

(E) *We generally test the basic white version of a model. Fridges with this footnote also have a version available with a stainless steel, platinum or other metal finish, generally at a slightly higher price.*

(F) *As of 1 October 2006 these models were replaced by the technically identical Electrolux EBM 4300WB and Electrolux ETM 5200WB. 'Kelvinator' was dropped from the name and the handle colour changed from white to silver. You may find the Kelvinator versions for a better price in some shops.*

(G) *To be upgraded with a new fan motor but the same model number. The version tested probably won't be available after November 2006.*

(H) *This chiller was too warm in our tests for optimal storage of perishable foods.*

(J) *With a temperature control, but the freezer needs to be quite cold for the chiller to reach optimal storage temperatures for perishable food.*

(K) *With temperature control.*

Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Freezer location	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Ease of use score (%)	3 Temperature performance score (%)	4 Energy efficiency score (%)	5 Crisper freshness score (%)	6 Fresh food cooling score (%)	6 Coo time (hr:m
200–299 L								
# **SAMSUNG** SR281NW	Top	57	68	44	82	32	53	6:31
# **NEC** NTM260R **(A)**	Top	55	62	37	84	60	53	6:48
FISHER & PAYKEL E249T **(B)**	Top	54	63	42	83	40	38	8:02
300–375 L								
# **FISHER & PAYKEL** Elegance E372B **(C)**	Bottom	77	72	72	84	95	76	4:14
FISHER & PAYKEL Tasman E331T **(C) (D)**	Top	76	71	68	91	90	78	4:13
SAMSUNG Cool n' Cool SRL316NW **(E)**	Bottom	74	71	71	85	71	70	4:58
WESTINGHOUSE RJ362V	Top	71	70	64	82	84	67	5:02
ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR N360J **(A)**	Top	67	70	52	86	78	70	4:44
WHIRLPOOL 6WMV35NW	Top	65	63	63	92	43	45	6:33
376–450 L								
WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso RJ423V	Top	80	76	81	82	84	80	3:44
FISHER & PAYKEL Tasman E381T **(C)**	Top	79	71	77	90	80	81	3:42
FISHER & PAYKEL Elegance E440T **(C) (D)**	Top	78	76	73	92	73	82	3:33
WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso RJ393V	Top	78	73	80	79	82	75	4:14
FISHER & PAYKEL Tasman E442B **(C) (D)**	Bottom	76	76	72	84	92	68	4:40
WESTINGHOUSE RJ422V	Top	75	73	71	86	80	69	4:39
# **ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR** NB430J **(E) (F)**	Bottom	74	70	78	79	79	53	5:42
FISHER & PAYKEL Elegance E402B **(C)**	Bottom	74	75	72	78	94	59	5:24
SAMSUNG SR446NW **(E)**	Top	74	70	73	89	63	66	4:50
WESTINGHOUSE RJ442V	Top	73	73	66	85	83	69	4:37
WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso BJ433V	Bottom	72	73	71	77	78	63	5:03
# **WESTINGHOUSE** Virtuoso BJ383V	Bottom	70	69	65	77	76	75	4:20
ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR NB380J	Bottom	69	67	68	76	76	60	5:26
SIMPSON STM3900WA	Top	66	70	51	87	74	71	4:33
WHIRLPOOL 6WMV43NW **(E)**	Top	61	66	51	91	35	54	5:39
BOSCH Intelligent Frost Free 40 KSU405216W **(A) (E)**	Top	59	64	43	83	60	67	4:53
451–525 L								
WESTINGHOUSE Virtuoso RJ525V **(E)**	Top	80	79	82	81	80	77	3:52
# **FISHER & PAYKEL** Elegance E521T **(C)**	Top	78	72	76	89	75	82	3:24
ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR NB510J **(E)**	Bottom	75	67	77	80	87	62	4:58
# **FISHER & PAYKEL** Elegance E522B **(C)**	Bottom	73	75	69	78	78	69	4:29
LG GR-R491JCA **(A)**	Top	73	70	74	87	69	56	5:22
WESTINGHOUSE RJ522V	Top	73	76	66	83	80	69	4:28
SIMPSON SBM5100MA	Bottom	72	70	71	79	87	60	5:07
# **HITACHI** R480ETSX **(E)**	Top	69	62	72	76	54	65	4:47
SAMSUNG SR502NXA **(E)**	Top	69	69	61	89	53	76	3:56
# **ELECTROLUX KELVINATOR** N520J **(E) (F)**	Top	66	70	45	91	80	75	4:03
# **NEC** NTM470R	Top	58	64	39	84	65	62	5:04
MORE THAN 525 L								
SAMSUNG Cool Tech Plus SRL550DW **(E)**	Bottom	73	72	64	88	74	79	3:39
SIDE-BY-SIDE								
WESTINGHOUSE WSE6100WA **(E)**	LH side	77	73	76	79	76	81	3:26
# **WHIRLPOOL** 6ED2FHKXRL **(G)**	LH side	74	77	72	88	90	39	6:07
LG GR-B197WVS	LH side	71	74	62	80	83	77	3:44
SAMSUNG SRS595NTD **(E)**	LH side	65	75	45	81	82	79	3:34
SAMSUNG SRS535NW	LH side	64	74	45	83	66	78	3:46

		FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS										COSTS	
aimed / asured rgy use h / year)	8 Noise level (dB)	Chiller	Crisper drawer	Dairy	Door hinge position	Remove shelves with door at 90°	Measured dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	9 Claimed total volume (L)	9 Claimed volume, fresh food (L)	9 Claimed volume, freezer (L)	Warranty (years)*	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	10 10-year running costs ($)	Price ($)**
1 / 445	43	✓	1		R		157 x 61 x 63	281	197	84	2	Thailand	Samsung	668	699
1 / 412	36		2		Rev, R		132 x 60 x 67	256	166	90	2	China	NEC	618	649
7 / 408	36		1	✓	Rev		161 x 53 x 58	248	191	57	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	612	809
8 / 482	35		2	✓	R or L	✓	160 x 64 x 70	373	250	123	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	723	1449
7 / 388	36		1	✓	Rev	✓	143 x 64 x 69	329	232	97	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	582	1019
5 / 447	37		1		R		178 x 60 x 66	316	199	117	2	China	Samsung	671	899
9 / 493	38		1	✓	R or L		164 x 70 x 65	364	273	91	2	Australia	Electrolux	740	1009
9 / 449	39		1	✓	R or L		164 x 70 x 65	364	273	91	2	Australia	Electrolux	674	1049
9 / 387	38	✓	1		Rev	✓	167 x 60 x 77	350	270	80	2	Brazil	Whirlpool	581	1099
8 / 523	37		1	✓	R or L		164 x 70 x 71	416	313	103	2	Australia	Electrolux	785	1589
3 / 424	35		1	✓	Rev	✓	161 x 64 x 70	380	283	97	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	636	1179
6 / 437	36		1	✓	R or L		161 x 69 x 70	447	342	105	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	656	1549
6 / 530	37		1	✓	R or L		172 x 70 x 65	393	302	91	2	Australia	Electrolux	795	1429
3 / 527	36		2	✓	Rev		170 x 67 x 71	442	307	135	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	791	1609
5 / 477	39		1	✓	R or L		164 x 70 x 71	416	313	103	2	Australia	Electrolux	716	1219
5 / 570	38		1	✓	R or L		172 x 71 x 71	431	300	131	2	Australia	Electrolux	855	1379
8 / 561	35		2	✓	R or L		171 x 64 x 70	403	280	123	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	842	1549
2 / 474	38	✓ (H)	1		R	✓	175 x 72 x 71	447	319	128	2	Korea	Samsung	711	1199
6 / 503	41		1	✓	R or L		172 x 70 x 71	442	339	103	2	Australia	Electrolux	755	1269
3 / 584	41		1	✓	R or L		172 x 71 x 71	431	300	131	2	Australia	Electrolux	876	1749
6 / 551	40		1	✓	R or L		172 x 71 x 64	381	267	114	2	Australia	Electrolux	827	1479
6 / 559	41		1	✓	R or L		172 x 71 x 65	381	267	114	2	Australia	Electrolux	839	1109
3 / 459	41		1	✓	R or L		172 x 70 x 65	393	302	91	2	Australia	Electrolux	689	1009
2 / 434	39	✓	1		Rev	✓	175 x 71 x 77	430	325	105	2	Brazil	Whirlpool	651	1299
1 / 519	35	✓ (H)	1	✓	Rev	✓	172 x 70 x 68	406	266	140	2	Brazil	BSH	779	1099
7 / 590	37		2	✓	R or L		172 x 80 x 71	517	396	121	2	Australia	Electrolux	885	1689
8 / 496	35		1	✓	R or L		170 x 80 x 71	517	400	117	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	744	1799
9 / 602	39		2	✓	R or L		172 x 81 x 71	505	349	156	2	Australia	Electrolux	903	1639
6 / 642	37		2	✓	R or L	✓	170 x 80 x 71	519	360	159	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	963	1849
0 / 524	35	✓ (H)	2	✓	R	✓	179 x 76 x 72	491	340	151	2	Korea	LG	786	1349
8 / 569	40		2	✓	R or L		172 x 80 x 71	517	396	121	2	Australia	Electrolux	854	1589
9 / 616	37		2	✓	R or L		173 x 80 x 71	505	349	156	2	Australia	Electrolux	924	1429
0 / 640	34		1		R	✓	170 x 75 x 73	480	320	160	2	Thailand	Hitachi	960	1549
5 / 503	35	✓ (H)	1		R	✓	175 x 78 x 73	502	349	153	2	Korea	Samsung	755	1399
8 / 480	39		2	✓	R or L		172 x 81 x 71	517	396	121	2	Australia	Electrolux	720	1689
5 / 542	39		1		R		176 x 77 x 74	470	319	151	2	Korea	NEC	813	1099
4 / 576	40	✓	1		R		180 x 83 x 73	551	361	190	2	Korea	Samsung	864	1999
7 / 705	41		2	✓	na		176 x 90 x 71	606	357	249	2	Australia	Electrolux	1058	1799
4 / 595	41	✓ (H) (J)	1	✓	na		170 x 84 x 78	640	415	225	2	USA	Whirlpool	893	2199
0 / 675	37	✓ (K)	1	✓	na		176 x 90 x 68	581	353	228	2	Korea	LG	1013	1899
2 / 670	37		2	✓	na		176 x 91 x 68	596	368	228	2	Korea	Samsung	1005	1999
2 / 605	36		2	✓	na		173 x 86 x 67	535	316	219	2	Korea	Samsung	908	1799

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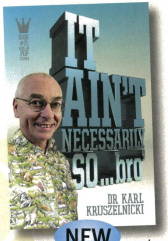

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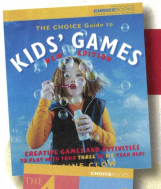

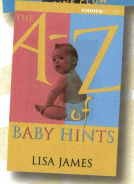

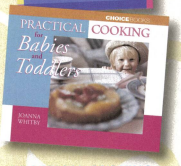

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recalls&bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on (02) 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD: Chang Shin International has recalled **frozen oysters** (block), a cardboard carton with clear plastic 400 g packets inside, and 20 x 400 g packets per carton. There's no brand on the outer packaging, but the brand **Fish World** is on the inner packets. All use-by dates up to and including 31 12 2007 are affected. The oysters were distributed in NSW and WA.
The problem: They may have suffered microbial contamination, namely norovirus.
What to do: Don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund. If you're concerned about your health, see your GP.

FOOD: Wah Lien Trading has recalled **Horlicks drink powder**, 350 g, 400 g and 850 g glass jars with a blue screwtop lid. Only products labelled in Malaysian are affected, and all best-before dates up to and including July 2007 are included. It was distributed in Melbourne only.
The problem: It may contain an undeclared allergen, milk protein.
What to do: If you have an allergy or intolerance to milk protein, don't eat or drink it; otherwise it's safe to use. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD: George Weston Foods has recalled **Tip Top Kitchen Collection Classic Seed Gourmet Bread Mix**, 500 g, a plastic bag in a cardboard box, with a best-before date of 28 April 2007.
The problem: It contains sesame seeds, which isn't stated on the label.
What to do: If you have an allergy to sesame seeds, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY: Jemark Imports has recalled **Band Jam Play Guitar**, toy number 041480.
The problem: The toy poses a choking hazard to young children.
What to do: Keep it out of the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

COMPUTER BATTERY: Apple Computer Australia has recalled **rechargeable lithium-ion batteries**, manufactured by Sony for **Apple 12-inch** and **15-inch Aluminium Powerbook G4** and **Apple 12-inch iBook Computers**, with the serial numbers in the table above.

Computer model	Apple 12-inch iBook G4	Apple 12-inch Aluminium PowerBook G4	Apple 15-inch Aluminium PowerBook G4
Battery model number	A1061	A1079	A1078 and A1148
Serial number range	ZZ338–ZZ427 3K429–3K611 6C519–6C552, ending with S9WA, S9WC or S9WD	ZZ411–ZZ427 3K428–3K611	3K425–3K601 6N530–6N551 ending with THTA, THTB or THTC. 6N601 ending with THTC

The problem: A defect in the manufacturing process can cause the battery packs to short-circuit internally, leading to extreme heat and/or flaming combustion.
What to do: Stop using the battery pack. Return it to your nearest Apple-authorised service provider to exchange it for a free replacement battery pack. For further information call 133 622 or go to http://support.apple.com/batteryprogram.

COMPUTER BATTERIES: Dell Australia has recalled **Sony batteries** sold with some Dell notebook computers, supplied between 1 April 2004 and 18 July 2006, either by way of purchase or by way of service replacement. The batteries were either sold separately or with the following Dell notebook computers: Dell Latitude D410, D500, D505, D510, D520, D600, D610, D620, D800, D810; Inspiron 6000, 8500, 8600, 9100, 9200, 9300, 500m, 510m, 600m, 6400, E1505, 700m, 710m, 9400, E1705; Precision M20, M60, M70 and M90 mobile workstations; and XPS, XPS Gen 2, XPS M170 and XPS M1710. "Dell" and one of the following are printed on the batteries: "Made in Japan" or "Made in China" or "Battery Cell made in Japan and assembled in China".
The problem: The affected batteries may overheat.
What to do: Take note of the identification number, which appears on a white sticker on the battery, and either ring Dell on 1300 734 947 between 8 am and 6 pm, Monday to Friday, or go to www.dellbatteryprogram.com to determine whether your battery is included in the recall.

POWERBOARD: Mirabella International has recalled **Mirabella Connect Powerboards**, model FS6C six-outlet board with a suppression filter, and model FS6D six-outlet board without the filter. They were on sale between April 2005 and the beginning of August 2006.
The problem: Under heavy use, some circuits could become faulty and pose a fire risk, or if the earthing circuit became faulty, could cause an electric shock if a faulty appliance were connected to that circuit.
What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

SMOKE DETECTOR: Tyco Group has recalled **Simplex photoelectric smoke detectors and sensors**, manufactured from July 2004 to December 2005. The affected models are: photoelectric smoke detectors, model numbers 4098-9601 and 4098-9601EA; TrueAlarm analogue photoelectric sensor, model number 4098-9714EA; TrueAlarm analogue multi-sensor, model number 4098-9754EA; and TrueAlarm duct housing, model number 4098-9755EA (the duct housing isn't affected, but the photoelectric sensor inside it (4098-9714EA) may be).
The problem: Contamination from a soldering process wasn't fully removed during manufacture, which may lower the sensitivity of the device for detecting smoke under conditions of both high heat and high humidity.
What to do: Contact your local Simplex office to arrange for a verification program to be carried out.

CANDLE: Lanshing, trading as **All Seasons Homeware**, has recalled **Café Aroma Candle**, a set of two 5.5 x 7.1 x 4 cm coffee-scented, coffee cup candles with dish, barcode number 9330028006977 and item number Co10508 printed on the label at the bottom of the package. They were sold in NSW and WA.
The problem: The candles contain decorative coffee beans, which may catch fire.
What to do: Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (02) 9609 7688 between 9 am and 5.50 pm AEST, Monday to Friday, or 0414 502 669, or go to www.lanshing.com.au.

HOT/COLD PACK: Eli Lilly Australia has recalled **Gemzar hot/cold packs**, which have an outer calico textile layer that encases a plastic bladder that holds a gel-like filling.
The problem: It might burst when exposed to high microwave wattages for extended heating periods.
What to do: If you received one during a hospital stay during May 2005 to June 2006, stop using it and dispose of it safely. For further information call (02) 9325 4347 or go to www.lilly.com.au.

BATTERIES: Quality IT Electronics have recalled **SONIQ 7 portable DVD player batteries**, model number DVP-710, sold through JB Hi-Fi stores between 13 June 2005 and 2 July 2006.
The problem: The battery pack is faulty.
What to do: For further information go to www.qualityit.com.au/recall or call 1300 765 663.

AIR CONDITIONER: Panasonic Australia has recalled **Panasonic air conditioners**, unit model numbers CU-A281KR, CU-C281KR, CU-A28BKP5 and CU-C28BKP5, sold between January 2001 and August 2004.
The problem: Some models have been affected by a burnt soft-start resistor, which affects electrical usage at start-up and, in extreme cases, may cause overheating or heat scarring.
What to do: Call 1800 216 676 between 10 am and 9 pm AEST, Monday to Friday; 10 am and 5 pm AEST Saturdays, for further instructions.

aboutchoice

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Cordless phones **Jan/Feb,** May*
Corkscrews **Mar**
Cosmetics, animal testing Apr
Cots **Oct,** Nov*
Credit card interest charges **Oct**

Digital camcorders **Dec**
Digital cameras **Apr, Oct**
Digital music **Apr,** Jun*
Dishwashers **Jan/Feb,** Mar*, **Jul,** Oct*
Dryers, clothes **Aug**
Dummy safety **Jul**
DVD/hard disc recorders **May,** Jun*, Jul*, **Nov**
DVD players, portable **Oct**

Eligible rollover funds Aug
Espresso machines **Jan/Feb**

Fast food, healthier **Mar**
Fish, frozen **Jan/Feb**
Food
  bread Sep
  cereal bars **Oct**
  fast food, healthier **Mar**
  fish, frozen **Jan/Feb**
  food at sports venues **Aug**
  'fresh' fruit and vegetables **Aug**
  'healthfood' in supermarkets May
  hummus **Jan/Feb**
  iced tea **Nov**
  meat pies **May**
  orange juice **Jun**
  pasta sauces **Jun**
  pesticides in fruit and veg Apr
  probiotics Jul
  promotions to kids Jun
  protein bars Jul
  salt Apr
Food processors **Nov**
Fridges, mixed sizes **May, Nov**
Fruit, 'fresh' **Aug**

Garden solar-powered lights **Aug**
Gas barbecues **Dec,** Jan/Feb*
Glass cleaners **Oct**
GPS car navigation systems **Jul**
Grass trimmers **Sep**
'Green' cars Sep
'Green' multipurpose cleaners **Apr**

Hair shampoo **Jul**
Health
  anti-snoring products Apr
  childhood obesity Oct
  hearing aids Jul
  slimming products Jan/Feb
  wheatgrass juice May
Health insurance, gap Sep
Healthcare system, how to save money Sep
'Healthfood' in supermarkets May
Hearing aids Jul
Heaters
  column **Jun**
  water Sep
Home theatre systems **Jan/Feb**
House-minding organisations Oct
Hummus **Jan/Feb**

Iced tea **Nov**
Inkjet printers **Nov**
Insect repellents, personal **Dec**
Insulation May
Irons, steam **Jun**

Kettles **Oct**
Kitchen benchtop materials Aug

Laptop computers **Jun**
Lawn trimmers **Sep**
Lawnmowers, petrol, mulch/catch **Nov**
LCD TVs, 66 cm **Dec**

Meat pies **May**
Media merging Aug
Microwave ovens **Jun**
Mixers, benchtop **Dec**
Mobile phones, GSM **Jun**
Mobility scooters Jan/Feb
Mosquito repellents, personal **Dec**
MP3 players **Apr,** Jun*
  speaker docks **Sep**
Music, digital **Apr,** Jun*

Nail salons **Sep**
Nannies, finding one May
Negative gearing Jul
Notebook computers **Jun**

Obesity in children Oct
Orange juice **Jun**
Ovens, microwave **Jun**
Nursing homes Sep

Painkillers Mar
Pasta sauces **Jun**
Personal trainer, finding a good one Apr
Personal video recorders (PVR)/set-top boxes **Jun**
Pesticides in fruit and veg Apr
Phones
  cordless **Jan/Feb,** May*
  mobile — see Mobile phones
Pies, meat **May**
Plasma TVs, 106 cm **Mar**
Portable DVD players **Oct**
Printers, inkjet **Nov**
Probiotics Jul
Protein bars **Jul**

Red wine **Dec**
Refrigerators — see Fridges
Rights when shopping Dec

Salt Apr
Sandwich (panini) presses **May,** Jul*
Scams Jul
School backpacks Dec
Scooters, mobility Jan/Feb
Secateurs **Jun**
Set-top boxes/PVR **Jun**
Shampoo **Jul**
Shonkys, The Nov
Shopping rights Dec
Silicone bakeware **Aug**
Slimming products Jan/Feb
Smoke alarms Jun
Snoring, anti-snoring products Apr
Solar-powered garden lights **Aug**
Speaker docks for iPods/MP3 players **Sep**
Strollers
  double **Aug**
  layback **May,** Aug*
Suitcases, wheeled **May**
Super, eligible rollover funds Aug
Supermarket brands Mar

Tanning, DIY **Nov**
Tea, iced **Nov**
Telephones — see Phones
Television
  LCD, 66 cm **Dec**
  LCD, 81 cm **Aug,** Sep*
  plasma, 106 cm **Mar**
  set-top boxes/PVR **Jun**
Timers **Jan/Feb**
Toasters, four-slice **Mar**
Tyres **Mar,** May*

USB keys **Apr**

Vacuum cleaners **Jan/Feb, Nov**
Vegetables, 'fresh' **Aug**
Video equipment
  camcorders **Dec**
  DVD/hard disc recorders **May,** Jun*, Jul*, **Nov**
  portable DVD players **Oct**
  PVR/set-top boxes **Jun**

Washing machines **Mar, Sep**
Water heaters Sep
Web cameras **Mar**
Wheatgrass juice May
Window cleaners Oct
Wine, red **Dec**

COUNCIL MEMBERS

The **Australian Consumers' Association** is governed by an honorary council elected by the voting members. (For information about voting membership, call (02) 9577 3399.) Members of the council give their time without reimbursement, and are not engaged as principals in industry, advertising or sales.

COUNCIL: Chair: Jan McClelland. **Deputy Chair:** Jenni Mack. **Members:** Robin Brown, Cynthia Cliff, Chris Field, Dianne Hill, Phil Marchionni, Joan Staples, John T D Wood.

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SORE THROAT
ANTI-BACTERIAL
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Sore
Cetylpyridinium Chloride 2.5 mg
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Contains sorbitol, fructose and glucose. Lemsip Lozenges contain no artificial colours or flavours. The presence of an antibacterial agent in throat lozenges has not been shown to have any effect on the severity or duration of a throat infection.
WARNINGS
Do not take if you are allergic to any of the ingredients. Keep out of the reach

Um ... not sure what the point of the antibacterial agent *is* then — sounds good, though...

Can you get the free mattress if you don't buy the bunk bed?

Eight-year-old Jesse Philips was shocked to see the power figure for this Commodore V8 was only 20 kW (rather than 270 kW or more). Well spotted, Jesse!

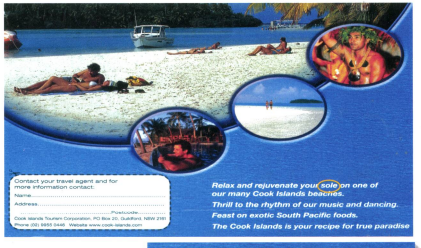
Wow, modern technology, eh?

Now, just how *did* they make that plastic rustproof?

Stop your lettuce from browning!
100% rust proof plastic
Code 09-233
$5.90
Lettuce knife
Slicing your lettuce with a normal metal knife will cause the ends to brown. This plastic lettuce knife will prevent this reaction and keep your greens fresher, longer. It also works as a slicer for salads and coleslaw and it will come in handy prepping tomatoes and other vegetables, too. Dishwasher safe.
Oc

Hmm... 90% plus 10% equals ...

A whole lot of savings for senior citizens!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Feast on exotic South Pacific foods.
The Cook Islands is your recipe for true paradise

Put your feet up...

Well, one of them at least.

Relax and rejuvenate your sole on one of our many Cook Islands beaches.
Thrill to the rhythm of our music and dancin

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The prize for the best entry goes to S Hannigan for the Lemsip. Thanks also to T Hunt, C Mackay, J Phillips, K Roberts and S Smith for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep them coming.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. **Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.**

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